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TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 27, NUMBER 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JUNE, 1947

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Loot of the Wolf

by Jackson Cole

When a mysterious cache of outlaw gold leads to a reign of lawlessness and death, the Lone Star Ranger rides into the Big Bend with his six-guns primed for a roaring showdown! Jim Hatfield pits himself against a chieftain of owlhooters dedicated to slaughter and terror! **11**

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Outlawed rider Littlejohn puts up a fight against odds to save a youngster

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A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters

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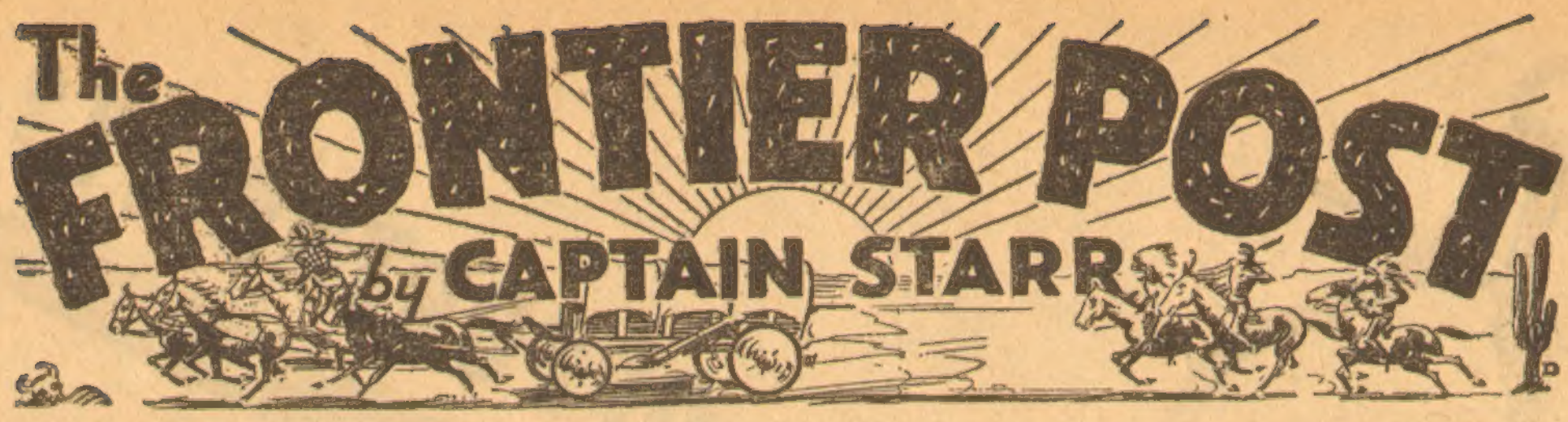

HIYA, gals and galluses! Opportunity comes in many strange disguises. Sometimes it's disguised as bad luck. It takes a savvy hombre to see through that disguise!

Awhile back there was a flood in a river valley that washed away most of a certain small rancher's land. Worse yet, he had it only about half paid for.

Most men would have quit cold, forfeited their equity and let the bank foreclose on the mortgage. But not this hombre.

Nearby was a hustling, bustling small town. It was growing fast, with a heap of building going on. There was a big demand for building material of all kinds—including sand, gravel and crushed rock.

This savvy hombre, he saw his opportunity. He borrowed money to buy a heavy truck, also a small rock crusher. His new business thrived from the start. He paid off his debts, including the mortgage on the "worthless land". Which, as it turned out, was about ten times more profitable than it had been as a bottomland pasture.

"Opportunity," says the dictionary, "is a conjunction of circumstances which makes certain action possible, with a probability of success."

The Cowtown of Kanab

There was a "conjunction of circumstances" that brought sudden prosperity to an entire community. It was the small cowtown of Kanab in southern Utah.

Roundabout Kanab is arid range country, something like west Texas. It was pretty hard pickings for cattlemen. It was a poor and backward region, where land was hardly worth the taxes.

There was a flock of gorgeous scenery—huge shifting sand dunes, canyons of blazing red and yellow, bluegreen forests, towering cliffs, timber-rimmed lakes and rushing mountain streams.

There's a saying that you can't eat scenery. But these days, Kanab folks are just about doing that, since a movie location director discovered that the vivid landscape was a technicolor paradise.

"Little Hollywood"

Kanab is called "little Hollywood" now, because it's the setting for many super-Westerns and has been taken over lock, stock and barrel by famous moguls of the screen. Filming is going on most all the time. Practically the entire population of Kanab, 1500, are hired as movie extras, most of them being picturesque folks. Tourists flock there to see famous stars in action. The town is full of guests. And the thousands of cattle and horses thereabouts are characters too in the never-ending saga of the West, worth more as "atmosphere" than they ever were as beef.

Opportunity appeared as a crushing misfortune to an Idaho man who bought and dried onions which the Army had contracted to buy. But in the drying, tons of onions were slightly scorched. The Army rejected the lot. Financial disaster stared the onion hombre in the face—until he learned that the scorched onions were ideal for making French onion soup. He set up a soup factory, canned his product and cleaned up big.

Bleak Wasteland

About the bleakest, barrenest hunk of wasteland in the West lies close to the Nevada-Utah boundary, southwest of Salt Lake. Early travelers dreaded it. Modern travelers shunned the heat and desert monotony. It was a dead-level stretch of glittering, snow-white salt, hard as concrete, from one to six feet in depth. Not a spear of anything would grow on it.

Nowadays, everybody has heard of the Bonneville Salt Flats, most famous speed testing ground in the world, where the powerful "Thunderbolt" was driven at 357 miles per hour, fastest time ever made by an automobile. The little town of Wendover, nearby, has become the mecca of speed kings.

(Continued on page 8)

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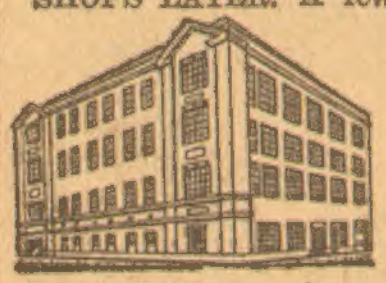

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(Continued from page 6)

Man isn't the only critter that can recognize and take quick advantage of opportunity. The animal most noted for being able to "light on its feet" is the cat, the plain alley-rabbit variety.

A kitten, deserted by travelers, took up lonely residence in a canyon on the California coast and in course of time grew up to be a tough ol' tomcat. It learned that beach picnickers often left throw-aways, mostly breadcrusts from sandwiches.

The cat didn't hanker for bread. But if it was left on the beach, gulls soon got it. So the cat took to picking up pieces of bread, carrying them back where it lived—and hunted. Field mice and other rodents that made up the cat's fare were attracted to the leftovers. Which simplified catching 'em. A "conjunction of circumstances" were recognized by that cat as an opportunity to bait its hunting ground.

Newcomers See Opportunities

Out West, newcomers see opportunities when old-timers are blind to 'em. It's a notable fact. I've seen it happen time and again, in a variety of ways.

Off Sundial Beach on the Columbia near Portland, Oregon, salmon fishermen flock in boats when the fish start their spawning migration up from the sea. It's cold and windy there. A man had a lunch stand a few miles away but wasn't doing very well. Not until he saw an opportunity.

He bought an old barge, loaded his lunch stand on it, and moored it out on the fishing ground. He immediately did a land-office business among the cold, hungry fishermen with hot coffee and hot dogs.

Something about the climate or soil, or both, made fleas thrive near Brownsville, Texas, where they became too numerous and active for human comfort. Natives scratched and complained. Until along came a gent who capitalized on conditions, by growing big, lively fleas. The region is now a growing and training center for the flea circuses you see in sideshow carnivals.

Other manufacturers competed sharply in producing modern glassware when the owner of a Pennsylvania glass plant learned that there was a crying demand for old-fashioned kerosene lamp chimneys. They sold so fast that his plant went on a 12-hour, 7-day

schedule, turning out 14 million chimneys last year.

Caves on the Range

Stockmen don't like caves, not when they're located on cattle range, because they contain lairs, usually inaccessible to hunters, for predatory animals. Cave formations in Mormon Canyon, near Glenrock, Wyoming, weren't considered an asset by grazers. Not until they recently discovered a huge one which may turn out to be a rival of famous Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico.

One room already explored is 100 feet across. The temperature in the cave is down pretty close to freezing, so if it doesn't turn out to be a tourist attraction, it contains possibilities for some opportunity-grabber as a cold natural cold storage warehouse of giant dimensions.

A California baker decided that something was wrong with his business. Folks were breakfasting on 70-cent eggs, 81-cent bacon, and toast made of bread he was compelled to sell for a measly 13 cents per loaf.

Nuts and raisins, grown in his community, were plentiful and comparatively cheap. The baker contrived a fancy nut-raisin bread priced at 50 cents per loaf. His customers went for it.

A little old back-country grandma with a heap of time on her hands was fond of knitting and mighty good at it. When she found out that big city stores were paying $6.50 a pair and up for fancy hand-knit woolen socks for men—well, she's turning out two pairs a week in her spare time!

Horse Boarding Ranches

Many well-off city dwellers hanker to own a saddle horse or two but haven't any place to keep 'em. That gave opportunity to numerous enterprising horse wranglers who bought or leased pasture near prosperous centers and started horse boarding ranches. I've known a few old, bent-up, over-age cowboys that made a big thing of it.

Opportunity is the only thing I know that thrives under neglect. That is, if nobody cultivates it, it grows bigger for whoever comes along to grab hold of it. For years menfolks patiently endured the burden of regular shaving. Then somebody started the annual Frontier Week celebrations which took hold like wildfire in scores of Western towns and cities.

(Continued on page 107)

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YES, THIN GILLETTES ARE MIGHTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING

A THOUSAND DOLLARS' REWARD! WHY, SIR . . .

THE LEAST OUR BANK CAN DO. MY NIECE HERE SAYS YOU SAVED HER LIFE

ISN'T HE HANDSOME!

A THIN GILLETTE SHAVE ALWAYS MAKES A HIT

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Goldy braced his powerful legs, the rope tightened, and slowly but surely Dan Thorp slid from the loathsome death-trap (CHAPTER III)

LOOT OF THE WOLF

By JACKSON COLE

When a mysterious cache of outlaw gold leads to a reign of lawlessness and death, the Lone Star Ranger rides into the Big Bend with six-guns primed for a roaring showdown!

CHAPTER I

Fire in the Night

AN HOUR before, the blazing red sun had dropped abruptly behind the turreted battlements of the mysterious Chisos Mountains, streaking their scarred faces with elusive hues of crimson, mauve and purple. Racing shadows had swooped like a horde of black panthers down into the long, narrow valley that cradled the town of San Jon.

The settlement lay quiet in the early evening dark, dirty lamplight from doorways and windows spearing out into the

A COMPLETE JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

rutted street. Wiry mountain horses stood hip-shot at racks. Roughly dressed, quick-tempered men drank and gambled in the saloons, some honest, some plotting their evil deeds in smoke-tainted shadows. For this was in the heart of the Big Bend, the wildest, toughest spot in all of frontier Texas.

In his office, Sheriff Judd Starke opened a desk drawer and took therefrom a half-empty bottle. Starke was a fat, red-haired, pale-eyed man whose crossed gun-belts dangled below his paunch. He had a reddish, down-curling mustache, and bristly tufts of red hair sprouted from the backs of his huge hands.

Young Jeff Ryder, Starke's deputy, watched with open distaste as the whisky gurgled down his superior's thick throat. Ryder was tall, dark-haired, with the grace and power of a wild animal evident in his muscular body. He wore simple range garb, with a bone-handled .45 in a holster strapped to his thigh. His brown eyes were straightforward and steady.

Sheriff Starke waved the whisky bottle airily. He was, as usual, half-drunk.

"Yuh worry too much, my boy," he declared pompously to Jeff. "Things will work out all right. Shore, I know this *El Gato* has got away with a few things. But that's about over. I'll cut his sign any day now."

"Yuh've been sayin' that for a year," Jeff Ryder said bluntly. "Folks are tired of promises—and of El Gato. They want action."

"They'll get it!" the sheriff said expansively. "Folks expect too much, and whine too much. What in blazes do they expect?"

"They expect the law to give 'em protection!" snapped young Ryder. "They expect that a killin' thief like El Gato will be caught and hanged. They're not whinin'. They're just scared—scared that their families will be killed in the dark. And they're bein' ruined!"

Starke frowned, squinting his pale eyes solemnly.

"I know yuh're right, my boy," he said. "El Gato's got a heart as black as a rattler with the hydrophobia. More, he's smart. I've tried every way I know to track him down, to trap him. What more can I do?"

"That's for you to decide."

RYDER'S tone plainly implied that he thought the sheriff's efforts had been rather puny. Starke looked quickly at his tall deputy, a glint of anger in his pale eyes.

"I'll decide, all right!" he said sharply. "I'll make the decisions in this office, don't forget that. I made you a deputy because I thought—" He broke off abruptly.

Jeff Ryder had risen quickly and stepped to the open door. The quick, hard thud of a running horse's hoofs came to his ears. A horse and rider streaked across a shaft of light that slanted from a doorway, swerved and headed directly toward the sheriff's office. The horse, Jeff Ryder had seen, was reeling, and he could hear the mount's harsh, tortured breathing in the shadows.

As the animal slid to a halt before the sheriff's office, Ryder leaped across the plank walk and ran forward, followed closely by Sheriff Starke. The rider had made no effort to dismount. He was slumped over the saddle-horn, and he also was breathing hard. A sharp premonition of evil gripped the deputy.

"Who is it?" the sheriff demanded. "What's happened?"

"It's Smoky Shane," Ryder said, in clipped tones. "He rides for Bill Jason up at the Boxed H. He's hurt, looks like."

At the sound of voices the rider had pulled himself erect.

"Shot—in the shoulder," he said, through tightening lips. "Not bad—but I must of passed out from the joltin'. That you, Jeff, and the sheriff?"

"That's right, Smoky," said Ryder. "Take it easy. Here—I'll help you into the office. Then you can tell us what's happened."

Ryder helped the wounded Boxed H rider from the saddle and into the sheriff's office, where "Smoky" slumped on a cot. The deputy sent another puncher, who had thrust his head inquisitively into the office, scurrying after a doctor.

Smoky Shane was a blocky, tow-headed

young fellow. His freckled face was pale and drawn with pain. Sheriff Starke had been bombarding him with a stream of impatient questions, from the instant he had dropped on the cot.

"A drink might help him," Ryder suggested.

Reluctantly, the sheriff handed over his bottle, and the wounded man took a deep swig at it. Color flowed back into his face almost instantly.

Ryder complied, and the sheriff demanded:

"But what about Bill Jason? What happened to him?"

"They'd captured Bill." Smoky's eyes darkened, his lips flattened against his teeth. "I couldn't do anything alone, wounded, and without a gun. They likely thought I was dead and wasn't payin' any attention to me. Soon as I could I crawled into the barn, managed to saddle a bronc,

JIM HATFIELD

"What happened, hombre?" Ryder asked gently.

The bottled-up words poured in a torrent from Smoky's lips.

"There's perdition to pay at the Boxed H! El Gato's gang of killers raided us just before sundown. Bill Jason and me were there alone. We made a fight of it, but we didn't have a chance. This bullet in my shoulder knocked me out. When I come to I was still layin' where I'd fell, close to the corral gate. I just laid there, playin' 'possum and watched. . . Give me another shot of that red-eye, will yuh?"

and headed for help. I figgered it was too late to help Bill, but I had to try. Blast their dirty black souls!" The puncher swore with baffled fury.

"What happened to Bill Jason?" Ryder snapped, a cold feeling rapidly gathering inside him.

"The killin' snakes had tied him up and put him inside the cabin," Smoky groaned. "When I left, they were nailin' up the doors and windows! I felt like a yeller hound, ridin' away, but what could I do?"

"Nothin' but get yoreself killed," said Jeff Ryder, "and that wouldn't have

helped Bill. Mebbe we can't help him either, but—"

"But, by Godfrey, we can try!" Sheriff Starke blared. "Bill Jason's my friend, and if he's been hurt I'll nail El Gato's mangy hide to the highest peak in the Chisos!" He swaggered to the door, and his bull-like bellow echoed through the town: "Come a-runnin', yuh curly-tailed rannihans, if yuh crave to sink yore fangs into some cat meat!"

Doc Corn, a bearded, dark-clad little man carrying a satchel, bustled into the room. Starke took a quick pull at the bottle.

"I'm turnin' the patient over to you, Doc," he said. And then, to Ryder, "Come on, my boy. Mebbe this night we'll see some of that action yuh been brayin' about!"

TEN minutes later a twenty-man posse thundered out of San Jon, headed northward toward Bill Jason's Boxed H. They rode silently, with the easy grace of Texas horsemen, with a wild night wind screaming and hammering at them.

In the shadows their faces were grim. Every man in the posse had either suffered at the hands of El Gato—The Cat—or had close relatives or friends who had had felt the poisonous scratch of the bandit leader's claws. Each of them would eagerly risk death for the chance of gunning down El Gato or wiping out his gang of killers.

They rode recklessly, scorning the shallow arroyos that slashed the valley floor, crashing heedlessly through clumps of Spanish dagger and bristling giant yucca. To the right and left of them, rugged mountain peaks towered blackly against the night sky, ancient and unexplored and hostile, guarding jealously their uncounted secrets of hidden treasure.

Miles drummed away beneath slashing hoofs. "Look!" a posseman cried suddenly.

Jeff Ryder had already seen the blood-red glow against the northern sky. The glow wavered and shifted, like a crimson stream flowing upward from the earth. Like, the deputy thought grimly, a man's life blood draining away—and he knew that this was probably what it meant.

"Looks like the sidewinders've set fire to the cabin!" Sheriff Starke bawled. "Feed steel to them crowbaits! Mebbe we ain't too late!"

The angry red glow grew stronger, drew steadily in toward them. And, moments later, as they rode recklessly and with drawn guns into the pine-hemmed clearing that held the Boxed H ranch buildings, the heart of every man in the posse sank despairingly.

The Boxed H ranchhouse was a blazing inferno!

The heat slapped them in the faces like an open-handed blow. The barns and smaller sheds stood unharmed. Several cows crowded against the far side of a pole corral, bawling, their eyes glaring with terror. These cows were the only sign of life.

El Gato's killers had finished their sinister task, and had left.

"Bill Jason's in there!" a posseman shouted, and swore with bitter futility. "The filthy sidewinders burnt him!"

Several of the riders leaped to the ground and ran forward. But the heat mauled at them with red fists, drove them back. Bill Jason was wholly beyond help. As they watched, the roof of the cabin caved in with a grumbling roar, filling the air above with sparks and blazing embers. Tongues of flame writhed upward, like clutching arms.

"Everybody stay back!" Sheriff Starke ordered, striding mightily back and forth, his mustache bristling. "The dastardly deed's done and nobody can help poor Bill now. This is the work of madmen, of inhuman monsters! But mark my words"—he shook his hairy fist dramatically toward the angry sky—"this night's work will be avenged! I'll have that hellion's scalp. I'll foller him to Tophet and jump over after him, if I have to. I'll—I'll—"

"Fine words, Sheriff, even though they are prompted by righteous anger," said a quiet voice. "But will your wrath remain with you in the cold light of tomorrow?"

The sheriff whirled. The man who had spoken was tall, incredibly skinny, dressed in unpressed broadcloth. His thin features appeared ageless, although he was past sixty. His eyes, covered by thick-lensed spectacles, were remarkably piercing and alert, and seemed to glow with an inward fire. The man was Hannibal Haines, owner and editor of San Jon's newspaper, the *Clarion*.

Hatfield's gun blasted again, and the bandit seemed to break in the middle, but his rush was so violent he slammed into the Ranger (CHAPTER XIX)

The sheriff grunted, scowled, produced his bottle and upended it.

"Steadies my nerves when I'm excited," he explained, swiping at his lips with a sleeve. "What do yuh mean by that, my friend?"

The editor shrugged. "Merely speaking in the light of past experience, Sheriff. This is by no means the first outrage perpetrated by this bandit and his killers. Two weeks ago Jube Cotton was called to his door and shot down. A month before that it was—"

"Yes—yes, I know all of the facts. I've been givin' these cases my whole attention for a long time now." Bolstered by the whisky, Starke was swaggering again, trying to give the impression that he could settle the matter whenever he wished.

"But nothing's happened." Hannibal shook a long finger under the fuming sheriff's nose. "What we need is action, not theories—results, not excuses!"

"Yuh'll get results!" The fat lawman was flushing angrily. "Before many days yuh'll have somethin' to put in yore sheet besides the plumb lies yuh've been printin' it!"

"Give me the story, Sheriff, and I'll be glad to smear it over the front page." Hannibal turned away, looking at the smoldering cabin. "But this—this is the first time El Gato has killed without apparent reason."

"He had a reason," Deputy Jeff Ryder spoke up grimly. "Or at least what he would call a reason. Just before I left town, Smoky Shane told me that Bill Jason had got a note from El Gato. three days ago. Bill had just delivered a bunch of beef cattle to the railhead and sold 'em for two thousand dollars. In his note the bandit told Bill to leave the two thousand at a certain spot last night, where it would be picked up. Bill didn't do it."

"And now he's dead!" the beanpole editor said with bitter anger. "The same story, over and over. Pay El Gato—or die! Surely there is some justice, some hope for the honest folks in this valley. Surely, somewhere, there is a man who can track this inhuman monster to his lair—who can meet and best him in a duel of wits, courage and ruthless violence!"

But where? Where was that man?

CHAPTER II

"Two Steps from Hades"

IN HIS Austin headquarters, crusty, grizzled Ranger Captain Bill McDowell jabbed a pencil with unnecessary viciousness at a spot on the map of Texas before him, between the Pecos and Rio Grande Rivers.

"The Chisos," he said to the man who occupied the room with him, "are here along the Rio. They're rough, and that means both mountains and men. They're full of renegade Apaches who'd cut a man's throat for a mescal button, and whites who'd do it for less. From end to end, and side to side, there's not a wilder, tougher spot in Texas—or anywhere else! Still want the job, Jim?"

Ranger Jim Hatfield—known the length and breadth of Texas as the Lone Wolf—sprawled in a chair across the desk from Captain McDowell, grinned lazily. He was a big man, and powerful, towering a full four inches above McDowell's six feet. Despite his size, there was a supple grace about him, and he could move with amazing speed when occasion demanded. His greenish eyes were usually gentle and lazy, as they were now, but when aroused they gave off the icy sheen of a glacier.

Since encroaching age had held Captain McDowell chained to his desk, whenever an exceptionally dangerous or difficult job came to his attention, the old Ranger always called in Jim Hatfield. The towering Lone Wolf had carried blazing Ranger law to the far reaches of Texas, from the Panhandle to the Gulf, from the Rio Grande to the pear thickets of East Texas.

With his hammering fists and the twin black six-shooters he wore in crossed gunbelts, backed by reckless courage, he had instilled fear and respect for Ranger law in the hearts of evil-doers wherever he met them. Fast and deadly with six-gun or rifle, expert at rough-and-tumble, there was not a more dangerous fighter in all the Lone Star State.

"I've heard of the Chisos," Hatfield said. "But I thought the Rangers cleaned out that neck of the woods a few years ago."

"Supposed to have cleaned out the Apaches," McDowell growled. "But the

worst ones got away and went back into the mountains. And whites that were ten times worse took their places. That stretch of country was a hang-out for killers and worse scum a long time before there was a Texas.

"The old Chihuahua Trail swings up out of Mexico through the Chisos. Big wagon trains were haulin' rich cargoes of gold, silver, lead, and other things over that trail long before I was born. And outlaw gangs were waitin' there to bushwhack 'em, to kill and pillage. It's no better today. The Chisos are just two steps away from Hades—mebbe not that far!"

"I'll take that job." Jim Hatfield's eyes glowed with eager anticipation. "But I'd like to know a little about it first."

The old Ranger captain shoved the map aside, unfolded what obviously was a letter, and glared at it scowlingly.

"This is postmarked San Jon," he said, "and it's signed by a gent named Dan Thorp who owns a ranch there. San Jon is in the Ocotillo Valley, which is right plumb in the middle of the Chisos. Accordin' to Thorp, the devil hisself has come to Ocotillo to live—only there he's knowed as El Gato."

"The Cat," murmured the Lone Wolf. "I hear there're plenty of Mexican lions down there along the Border. What's this one been up to?"

"It's kind of a new one on me." McDowell continued to scowl at the letter. "Usually, in cattle country, where there's an outlaw gang, yuh'll find rustlin'. But accordin' to Thorp, this El Gato ain't a rustler. He never touches a cow critter."

"Robbery, eh?" asked Hatfield.

"No! Not, that is, what yuh usually mean when you say robbery. El Gato's rakin' in plenty of dinero—but he don't hold nobody up at the point of a gun. Extortion, that's what honest folks down there are up against—dirty, cowardly, shoot-in-the-back extortion. I got some respect for an hombre with nerve enough to stick his gun-muzzle in a man's middle and take his money." The old Ranger's hammering fist jarred an ink bottle from the desk to the floor. "But a cussed extortionist that sneaks up in the dark and nails a note to a man's door while he sleeps— By Godfrey, Jim, how quick can yuh start?"

"In twenty minutes," the tall Ranger said calmly, hiding a covert smile behind his big hand. "But is that all the letter says? Don't it tell what happens when somebody fails to knuckle under to this El Gato?"

"Yes, cuss it! Read it yoreself!"

HATFIELD deftly caught the letter the captain flung at him, and gradually his greenish eyes narrowed and hardened as he read Dan Thorp's appeal for Ranger aid. According to Thorp, who owned the little HL outfit, nobody knew who El Gato really was. The bandit leader's demands were always for cash, never for cattle, from well-to-do ranchers or from those who had recently made cattle sales.

On a few occasions ranchers had ignored the hellion's demands, or had defied him, and in each instance they had died violent deaths, on two or three occasions their families with them. Now, for the most part, so great was their fear of the mysterious El Gato, the ranchers of Ocotillo Valley submitted to extortion rather than risk almost certain death.

The ranchers were slowly being driven to ruin by the bandit's exorbitant demands. They were enraged, ready to fight, but nobody had been able to trace the renegade gang to their hideout. The sheriff had proved wholly inadequate for the job.

Jim Hatfield lifted gray-green eyes from the letter. He had a deep-seated hatred for outlaws, especially those who struck and killed from cover or the dark.

"Dan Thorp says he's just received a letter from El Gato, demanding a thousand dollars," the Lone Wolf said. "But he seems to have spunk. He's shore this El Gato will try to kill him, but says he don't aim to give the scoundrel a cent."

"If there were a few more like him—" said McDowell. "But there's somethin' else I don't quite savvy. That postscript there at the bottom of the page. Yuh read that?"

Hatfield nodded slowly. "It says, 'See me before you talk to anybody else. I've got a hunch I can tell yuh who El Gato is, and his real reason for bein' in Ocotillo Valley. Hurry!' That tells a lot, all right —and nothin'."

"You head for the Chisos, pronto!" the captain advised. "Go straight to Dan

Thorp's ranch and find out what he knows. Seems to me, accordin' to that postscript, there's more to what's happenin' than just extortion. Whatever it is, you get down there and fix it!"

Hatfield grinned again, got to his feet with the quick, easy grace of a puma. No matter how perilous or difficult the assignment, Bill McDowell's blandly confident instructions to the towering Ranger were to "fix it". And Jim Hatfield seldom failed to fix it. . . .

Mounted on his magnificent golden sorrel gelding, Goldy, Hatfield forged steadily ahead at a leisurely yet mile-eating gait. After days of riding he had reached Ocotillo Valley, in the heart of the frowning Chisos Mountains of the Big Bend—a long, narrow stretch of fertile rangeland cradled between towering mountain ranges. According to directions he had received a few miles back, the big Ranger knew that he was approaching Dan Thorp's HL outfit.

As he rode along, Hatfield's alert eyes regarded his surroundings with keen appreciation. He loved Texas, and his duties had carried him to all sections of the great state—the flat, blizzard-lashed plains of the Panhandle in winter, the lush tropical Gulf Coast, the tangled thickets of East Texas, the rugged mountains of the southwestern section—yet he never failed to find new wonders to marvel at. And of them all none was more interesting, more mysterious and remote than the section in which he now found himself.

During the last three days' ride he had seen incredible contrast. Lush basins, slashed by clear, rushing streams, like the one he was now traversing; waterless, heat-blasted desertland; mountain masses, like scraps thrown up by some titanic convulsion. There was game in profusion—black bear, deer, mountain lion, peccary, wild turkey, and dozens of other varieties of wild life.

The giant yucca, Spanish dagger, the yellow bells of the tornilla, sunflowers, poppies, cactus, all blending and making a shimmering sea of colors, with the unholy ocotillo plants on the red mountainsides raising their gaunt, snakelike limbs to slash with their fanglike thorns anything that touched them.

A world in itself—a raw, crude land, a strange, lost land, incredibly beautiful, yet terrible in its tremendous isolation and loneliness—and a part of Texas. Jim Hatfield breathed deeply of the flower-scented air, his heart swelling with justified pride in the part he was playing in making this empire within an empire a decent, safe place for honest folks to live and prosper.

GOLDY suddenly pricked up his ears, arched his silky neck. Through a long partnership on the danger trails, Hatfield had learned that the big sorrel was as adept as he, and sometimes more so, at spotting lurking peril before it struck.

"What is it, boy?" he murmured, instantly wary.

The sorrel tossed his head. At the same moment Hatfield heard the sound. It was a low, moaning sound—wordless, but unmistakably the voice of a man. The sound came from ahead, and slightly to his left.

Hatfield never took needless chances. He drew one of his black-butted guns and rode slowly forward. He heard the sound again, nearer; still no words, but nevertheless poignant with misery and hopelessness. Even plainer than words it told that some man was suffering great pain, or fear.

Sensing the need for haste, the Ranger sent Goldy plunging recklessly forward. Suddenly he emerged from the belt of scrub timber through which he had been threading and onto the low bank of a sandy-bottomed creek. Although fifty feet of reddish soil lay between the banks, there was only a thin trickle of water a few feet wide writhing along the middle of the stream bed.

The sound had stopped, and Hatfield dragged the sorrel to a halt, his greenish eyes probing the vicinity in puzzlement. Twenty feet away, on this side of the creek, was a nest of red boulders. Across the creek was a brush-covered slope that lifted gradually to its crest a hundred yards away. It was from this immediate vicinity, Hatfield knew, that the queer, moaning sound had come.

Goldy was prancing nervously, looking toward the middle of the creek bed. Hatfield followed the sorrel's gaze—and suddenly he stiffened in the saddle, horror rioting through him.

There on the reddish sand lay the head of a man!

Stark surprise held the Ranger motion-

less a moment. At first, the head had appeared bodiless. But now Hatfield saw that the upper portion of the man's shoulders, covered with muck, also protruded above the reddish earth.

To Hatfield came the shocking realization that this man was buried almost to his neck in quicksand! And he was alive. His eyes were wide-staring and filled with hopeless terror. His lips were moving soundlessly as he stared at the Ranger.

Jim Hatfield leaped from the saddle.

"Hang and rattle," he called encouragingly. "I'll have yuh out of there in a jiffy!"

He ran toward the submerged man, not realizing in his eagerness his own peril until his boots started sinking into the fetid ooze. He stopped, backed away, darted to the sorrel and snatched a rope from the saddle-horn. The man was probably fifteen feet from the solid bank. How, the Ranger wondered, had he got that far into the deadly soap-hole without realizing his danger?

Hurriedly he coiled the rope.

"I'm goin' to rope yuh and pull yuh out!" he called. "Lift yore arms so's I can get a loop under yore shoulders."

The head moved jerkily in the negative. "Can't," the man gasped hoarsely. "Hands —tied behind—me!"

Again Hatfield felt the shock of surprise and anger. A man buried in quicksand with his arms bound behind him could mean only one thing—a deliberate and brutal attempt at killing.

CHAPTER III

El Gato's Claws

THERE was no time to ask questions, to wonder what manner of man, or men, would commit such a crime. The bound man was steadily sinking lower into the mass of slime, and in another five minutes would be completely submerged. The Lone Wolf's brain worked like lightning, his gaze darting swiftly about.

On the creek bank nearby lay a dead pine log perhaps twenty feet in length and almost as thick as a man's body. Hatfield seized the log, dragged it over the low embankment and to a spot as near as he

Hatfield's right shoulder struck Toombs savagely at the belt line (CHAPTER XII)

PARKHURST

could approach to the trapped man. Again he grasped the end farthest from the quicksand, his mighty muscles corded, strained, and slowly he upended the log.

Then he let the log topple forward into the quicksand, narrowly missing the man, as he had intended, as it measured its length. The Ranger knew quicksand, knew that it would require a considerable length of time for the log's weight to sink it into the muck. He jumped onto the improvised bridge, agilely traversed its length, pausing beside the head and shoulders jutting from the bog-hole. He knelt, a knife in one hand.

The man, Hatfield now saw, was perhaps middle-aged, almost bald. He was looking up at the big Ranger, gratitude and fresh hope blotting some of the terror from his eyes.

"Yuh got here—just in time, stranger," he mumbled jerkily. "But yuh'll—have to —hurry. El Gato's hellions ain't far away!"

"El Gato?" The log was already half buried in the quivering, jellylike mass. Hatfield was driving the hand that held the knife down into the odorous stuff behind the bald man.

"What's yore name, mister?" he asked.

"Dan Thorp!" the man choked. He was looking at the badge on Hatfield's gray shirt. "And yuh're a Ranger. Come—in answer to my letter, I reckon. That right?"

Hatfield nodded tersely. He had found the thong that bound Thorp's wrists together, and quickly slashed through it.

"How'd yuh get here?" he asked.

"Couple of El Gato's gang captured me. They aimed to make me tell where—" Thorp paused, a secretive light coming into his small eyes, even in his desperate situation. "Aimed to try to make me talk. When I wouldn't tell 'em what they wanted to know, they brought me here and dumped me into this soap-hole. Said I could talk, or die. I—I guess I must have kind of gone out of my head for a while. Get me out of here, Ranger, and I'll tell yuh the whole story. I'm sick of the whole business—afraid to go to sleep at night, scared every hour will be my last—"

"That'll have to wait," Hatfield said swiftly. "This log's about under, and I couldn't lift yuh out anyhow. Hold up yore arms so I can get a rope over 'em."

He turned and ran back along the almost-submerged log. He picked up the rope, and when Thorp raised his arms, cast it deftly over them. Thorp worked the loop down into the ooze beneath his armpits. In seconds Hatfield was on the big sorrel, had the other end of the rope about the saddle-horn.

He spoke gently to the golden horse. Goldy braced his powerful legs, the rope tightened. Slowly, but surely, Dan Thorp slid from the loathsome death-trap that had almost claimed him and onto dry, solid earth. Hatfield dismounted, knelt beside the shaken man to remove the rope from his shoulders.

Thorp lay sprawled on the ground, breathing hard, mentally and physically exhausted from his ordeal. From shoulders to feet he was coated with the slimy, ropy muck. Hatfield grimaced with distaste as he half-lifted Thorp to remove the rope.

As he tugged at the slippery noose, he congratulated himself on arriving in time to save Dan Thorp. Apparently the wiry rancher held the key—possibly he was the only one who did—to the sinister mystery the Lone Wolf had ridden several hundred miles to solve.

"Hurry!" Thorp said huskily. "Didn't yuh hear me say the skunks that put me in that hole are still somewheres close? They said they'd be where they could hear me if I changed my mind and decided to talk. I was tryin' to call 'em when you showed up. I'm glad they didn't hear me. Now I can tell yuh—"

Thorp's words broke off abruptly, and a tremor ran through his body. An instant later the crash of a rifle smote Hatfield's ears. He had the rope loose, and now he flung himself sideward, realizing that Thorp had been hit. The rancher had fallen back to the ground, where he lay writhing, moaning weakly. Crimson showed high on his chest through the muck.

The rifle shot had come from the brush-covered slope on the far side of the creek. A gray wisp of smoke was curling upward.

WITH incredible quickness for a man of his size, Hatfield leaped to the sorrel, snatched a carbine from the saddle-boot, slapped the big horse sharply on the rump.

"Find cover, Goldy!" he yelled.

Then he leaped back to the wounded man, seized him under the armpits and started dragging him toward the nest of boulders a few yards away.

The rifle on the slope blasted again, and was joined by another, the bullets snarling wickedly past, only inches from the Ranger's head. By leaving Thorp, who possibly was already dead, a couple of jumps would have carried him to the boulders, and safety. But it was not his way to buy personal safety at the price of other lives.

With the bullets still boring the air and slashing into the earth about him, he gained the boulders with Thorp. They formed a sort of natural fortress that afforded ample shelter. He dropped the wounded man, snaked the carbine over a boulder and blazed hot lead at the puffs of smoke on the side of the ridge.

The ambushers' guns fell silent.

Rage drumming inside him, Hatfield's keen eyes probed the dense underbrush. But, as the smoke drifted away, he could see no sign of movement. The killers were well-covered.

At a low moan from Thorp, he turned. The rancher was conscious, but it was instantly apparent to the Ranger that Thorp had been hit fatally and was dying. Thorp was looking at him with dull eyes, his face ghastly, his lips working as if trying to talk.

"Take it easy," Hatfield said gently. He knelt and pulled aside the muck-covered shirt. "Yuh'll be all right now."

Thorp shook his head jerkily, swallowed hard, trying desperately to speak. Death was only seconds away.

"Ridin'—last trail—Ranger," he whispered. "Got to talk—first. Done a—bad thing—want to straighten it—"

He paused, shivering, his eyes closed. Hatfield knew that he couldn't help this man. Whether Thorp lay quiet or talked would not change his fate. But by talking he could save a lot of trouble and time, maybe save lives.

"Who is El Gato, and what was he tryin' to make yuh tell him?" Hatfield asked softly.

For a moment he thought Thorp hadn't heard. Then, although the wounded man's eyes remained closed, his pale lips moved slightly, almost soundlessly.

"Tell Webb—loot hidden—" Dan Thorp shuddered convulsively. "Bad—water . . ."

Thorp said nothing more. He was dead.

Sharp disappointment inside him, the Lone Wolf turned away from the still figure. There still were the two drygulchers to be taken care of. If he could capture one of them and make him talk— Then he knew that he was doomed to failure in this also.

The ambushers, obviously confident that they had killed Thorp, had quit the fight. Dimly from the far side of the ridge sounded the swift clatter of hoofs. Hatfield knew that before he could reach Goldy, where the sorrel had taken refuge in the nearby timber, and cross the ridge, the killers would be hopelessly lost in the rough country.

Grimly, the towering Ranger took stock. He had met the enemy, even before reaching his destination, and had suffered a definite defeat. Whether this set-back would have far-reaching effects remained for the future to tell. In any case, long experience had taught Jim Hatfield that one set-back—or a dozen—did not mean final defeat.

This skirmish had only whetted his appetite, made him impatiently eager to come to close grips with the sinister and murderous El Gato. For now he knew first-hand the deadly and merciless nature of the bandit leader.

He whistled for the golden sorrel and, with Dan Thorp's lifeless body across the saddle before him, proceeded toward San Jon. . . .

Hatfield reached San Jon by mid-afternoon, and found the town slightly larger than most others in that portion of frontier Texas, but little different in other respects. It consisted of a single rutted street, lined on both sides with structures that were mostly wooden frame buildings, with some hovels, and quite a few made of adobe bricks and with thatched roofs.

San Jon, hardened and accustomed to sudden death and the unusual, nevertheless showed quick interest as the big Ranger and the spirited gelding rode along the street with their grim burden. Hatfield's eyes, alert, as always, had located a building with a "Sheriff's Office" sign on it. He headed for this building, seemingly unaware of the staring, suspicious-eyed townsmen.

AS HE dismounted at the tie-bar, a fat pale-eyed man wearing a sheriff's badge came from the office. Sheriff Starke stared hard, spat, stepped to the ground and swaggered forward.

"What yuh got there, stranger?" he demanded.

"A dead man," Hatfield said calmly, giving the big lawman a quick appraising once-over. "You the sheriff?"

"I shore am!" Starke's double-chin jutted belligerently. "You beef this gent?"

"No. Blame El Gato for it."

"El Gato!" The sheriff's pale eyes narrowed and his hand dropped to his gun-butt. "We don't like that name around here, mister, nor trust strangers that use it. Stand back, while I have a look-see!"

Hatfield didn't stand aside, but forced the sheriff to circle around him as he approached the sorrel. He caught a whiff of stale whisky from the lawman. A keen judge of men, his reaction to the blustering lawman was quick and unfavorable.

A crowd had converged on the spot. They watched silently, with set faces and suspicious, heatless eyes.

"Dan Thorp!" the sheriff exclaimed, and swore. "Dead as burnt grass. Tall man"—he whirled on Hatfield, hand again on his gun—"yuh got same explainin' to do!"

Hatfield shrugged. His badge which Dan Thorp had seen, now was in a small pocket inside his shirt, made especially for that purpose. He was not yet ready to reveal to the sheriff and townsmen his identity as a Ranger.

"It won't take long to do my explainin'," he said. "My name's Jim Lash, and what I do and where I'm from is my business. Point is, I was headin' across country for San Jon a little while ago, when I heard somebody call for help, and I done the best I could."

He told a straight story of what had happened, holding back only what he considered it necessary to withhold.

"And, before he died, Thorp told yuh El Gato's hellions had put him in that quicksand?" Sheriff Starke demanded.

Hatfield nodded. "Who's this El Gato?" he asked.

"He's a cross between a filth-eatin' buzzard and a hydrophoby sidewinder!" a townsman burst out angrily. "Bill Jason two weeks ago, now Dan Thorp. Who'll be next?"

"Dan Thorp was my friend," Sheriff Starke growled. "So was Bill Jason. I'll 'tend to El Gato. I'll have his hide to nail on a barn door!"

"Yuh said that the night Jason was burned inside his nailed-up ranch house!" another townsman challenged. "But nothin' happened. I've about decided nothin' will ever happen till we get another sheriff!"

"I done all I could," protested Starke. "My posse trailed them wolves till we lost their sign in the Devil's Playground. Couldn't trail a herd of elephants in there. You was in the posse, Jake—you know that's a fact."

Apparently it was, for the man called Jake subsided. Hatfield had been leaning against a post, watching, missing nothing.

Sheriff Starke whirled back to Hatfield, and with surprising quickness a gun appeared in his hand. The Ranger had anticipated this, but he had made no effort to forestall it. His jaw slackened with faked surprise.

"Hey—what yuh mean by that?" he demanded.

"I mean I ain't takin' yore word for this," the sheriff growled, scowling darkly. "Mebbe yuh found Dan Thorp in that quicksand, mebbe not. And mebbe yuh put that bullet in him yoreself. I'm lockin' yuh up till I look into this. How do I know yuh ain't a member of El Gato's bunch?"

CHAPTER IV

Fist and Whip

HATFIELD held his attitude of stunned surprise for a moment, his brain working fast. Probably the gross, red-haired sheriff was honest enough, although he impressed Hatfield as being a whisky-swilling braggart. Even so, the Ranger was not ready to reveal his identity. Neither did he wish to be arrested, nor to be forced to resist arrest.

"Yuh're makin' a mistake, Sheriff," he said earnestly. "This happened just like I said."

"Can yuh prove it?" demanded Starke.

Before Hatfield could answer, a tall, black-haired young fellow who was wearing a deputy's badge, spoke up.

"His story sounds straight enough to me, Sheriff," Deputy Jeff Ryder declared. "If he'd had anything to do with the killin' I don't believe he would have brought the body into town."

"I'll decide this, my boy," the sheriff snapped. "Yuh ain't had the experience I've had in such matters."

"But yuh can't—"

"Can't I?"

Fat men, Hatfield knew, often were regarded as comical figures. But there was nothing comical about Judd Starke. Underneath his bluster Hatfield detected something cruel, ruthless, deadly.

"Yuh say two men fired on you and Thorp, killin' Thorp," the sheriff said to Hatfield. "What did they look like?"

"I don't know," said Hatfield. "I didn't see 'em. Like I said, they fired from ambush."

"Did Thorp talk before he died?" asked Stark.

"Nothin' that made sense, except that it was two of El Gato's men that stuck him in the quicksand."

"Hombre," the sheriff said, "yuh might be tellin' the truth. But I'm holdin' yuh till I find out. I aim to lock yuh up!"

"He is telling the truth!" rang out a clear, young voice.

Every head turned to stare at the girl who was pushing her way through the roughly dressed men. Seconds after his own arrival, Hatfield had seen the girl ride into town on a palomino pony, and draw to a halt a few yards away. She had heard everything that had been said.

She was, the Ranger saw, a remarkably pretty girl. Tall, golden-haired, with a strong, well-rounded body. She was dressed in denims, shirt and boots, a garb which enhanced rather than detracted from her feminine grace and beauty. Her skin was the velvety color of sunshine itself, her blue-gray eyes straight-forward and honest.

The bystanders parted to give her passage, and she paused beside the dark-haired deputy, Jeff Ryder.

"This man's telling a straight story, Sheriff," she repeated.

"Janet, yuh've no call to—" Ryder began, but she stopped him with a quick gesture.

"Miss Addison," Starke said heavily, "yuh don't know what this is all about. This hombre brought a dead man into town— By jacks, he was yore own uncle, Miss Addison, Dan Thorp was!"

"My stepuncle," she corrected, in a low voice. "My father's stepbrother. And I'd know what happened, even if I hadn't heard what was just said."

"How could yuh know that?"

"Because I saw it! The last part of it, that is. I was out riding, and from a ridge close by I saw this man—this Jim Lash I just heard him say his name was—ride up and pull Uncle Dan from the quicksand. I saw the two men fire on them from ambush, and kill Uncle Dan. Then I saw Lash here head for town with the body, and I followed."

There was deep silence for a moment. The sheriff seemed nonplussed. He let the gun muzzle sag, a fact of which Hat-

[*Turn page*]

...ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT!

field could easily have taken advantage, but didn't. He remained silent, motionless, watching.

The girl, he decided, was lying. Why?

"Well, I don't know," Starke muttered. "What yuh say may be true, Janet—Miss Addison. But I can't afford to make mistakes. More men might die, if I did."

"But I tell you I saw it happen!" The girl stamped her small foot into the dust, her eyes flashing angry lights. "Do you think I'd lie about it?"

"Why—why, no, of course not! I just thought—"

"Then why not put away your gun and let this man go?" Janet Addison's eyes still held blazing scorn. "You should thank him, instead of persecuting him. He at least tried to save a man's life, and it was no fault of his that he failed. That's more than I can say for some others!"

SHERIFF Starke's flabby face had turned a brick red under the lash of her tongue. Two or three men sniggered.

"Now, now, Miss Addison, yuh're all excited," Starke remonstrated. "Shore, I'll let this gent go. I was just tryin' to do my duty as I saw it. I hope yuh won't hold it against me."

But the girl, her chin in the air, had whirled and was striding swiftly along the plank walk. Hatfield watched, grinning covertly with admiration at the way she had handled the flustered sheriff, until she turned in at a store.

Sheriff Starke gave brusk orders, and a couple of townsmen lifted the body from the sorrel and carried it across the street to the funeral parlor. The crowd drifted away.

"Yuh still want me, Sheriff" the Ranger asked, grinning with open malice now. "Because if yuh don't, I'm hungry enough to start eatin' the doors off the hinges."

"Not now, tall man." The sheriff stared at Hatfield with his pale, heatless eyes. "Yuh figger to tarry long in these parts?"

"*Quien sabe?* I might, if I like what I see."

"Sometimes it don't pay to see too much —nor say too much. Just remember that, if yuh want to stay out of trouble."

The lawman turned and waddled back into the office, where the Ranger saw him open a desk drawer, take out a bottle and tilt it eagerly to his lips. Mentally placing each thing he had seen and heard in its proper place, Hatfield took Goldy's reins and started leading the sorrel along the street toward a livery stable sign he had spotted.

Deputy Sheriff Jeff Ryder, who had stood silently by since his superior's rebuke, fell into step beside the Ranger. Hatfield had immediately liked the clear-eyed young deputy, tabulating him as both honest and courageous.

"Just passin' through, Lash?" Ryder asked casually.

Hatfield grinned. "Curious, or just makin' talk?"

"Both," the deputy admitted, returning the grin. "If it matters, I think yuh told it straight about that killin'."

"I did. And I think the girl—stretched the truth a little, about seein' it happen. Who is she?"

"Janet Addison." There was a flush on the deputy's young face, a look in his eyes, which told Hatfield plainer than words that Ryder was in love with the girl. "She's the daughter of Webb Addison, who owns the Half Moon outfit a few miles to the west. Like she said, Dan Thorp was her stepuncle, and their places joined. She— I think she was fibbin', too. Why, I don't know, unless she had the same hunch I have. That you're on the level."

"Thanks," the Lone Wolf murmured. "I'll remember that. What about this El Gato hombre? Got any idea who he really is, or where he hangs out?"

"I've got ideas, all right, like everybody else." The tall deputy frowned. "He might be any one of a dozen men I know in the valley, or he might be somebody I never even saw. There's been considerable talk about Turk Laval, but no proof."

They had paused before the livery stable.

"Who, and what, is Turk Laval?" asked Hatfield.

"He owns the Cross Bar outfit in the southern end of the valley. His outfit backs right up against the Devil's Playground, which is a wild, rough strip—all canyons and walls and pot-holes. Unfit for grazin'. A place which honest folks stay away from. It's the general opinion that El Gato's gang has a hideout somewheres in the Devil's Playground. That's

where their trail usually leads, and is lost."

"But there's no real proof that Laval is El Gato?"

Ryder shook his head reluctantly.

"Mebbe it's because he's tough, and dangerous, and folks just naturally don't like him that some think he's El Gato. He—" Jeff Ryder broke off with an exclamation, lowering his voice. "Speak of the devil and yuh'll smell brimstone!"

Hatfield had already seen several riders coming along the street. At their head was a man mounted on a cream gelding whose ornate trappings jangled and gleamed in the late sun. He wore a flat-crowned hat, dark velvet trousers, and a fancy elkskin jacket. His dark, hawklike features were stamped with arrogance and power, his black eyes were lofty with contempt for all lesser men. About "Turk" Laval there was an air of bitter, warning cruelty.

Hatfield's interested gaze shifted to the rider beside Laval. This rider was huge, not so tall as Hatfield himself, but thicker of body. His shoulders and torso were enormous. His shaggy long hair was so blond it was almost white, his skin was pasty, and his chalk-colored eyes as expressionless as mud.

Coiled round and round this man's thick neck was a long-lashed bullwhip.

THE OTHER riders were gun-belted and hard-faced, but otherwise no different in appearance from scores of others Hatfield had seen on this wild frontier.

The riders passed on, not even glancing at Hatfield and Ryder, and drew up before a saloon a block along the street.

"So that was Turk Laval," the tall Ranger murmured. "He looks plenty salty, all right—which is nothin' to hold against him. Yuh have to be salty in the Big Bend, or push up daisies. Who was the hombre with the whip?"

"Laval's watch-dog," Ryder said. "Name's Ike Toombs, and wherever yuh find one you'll find the other. Toombs is short on brains, but strong as a grizzly, and he can pluck out a man's eyes at thirty feet with that devilish whip he always carries. A snap of Laval's finger and Toombs would fight Satan hisself!"

"Sounds like a nice playmate—for rattlers and cougars!" commented Hatfield. "Well, Jeff, mebbe I'll be seein' yuh about town."

"You will," Ryder promised, "if yuh stay here long."

After graining and watering the sorrel, Hatfield turned back along the street and entered a restaurant. He hadn't eaten since early morning and was ravenous.

By now the sun was drifting low over the serrated Chisos. The peaks lifted like blunt, blood-smeared fingers against the sky. Those mountain wilds, the Indians and Mexicans claimed, were peopled by evil spirits, and stained by the life blood of the unnumbered men who had gone there seeking the fabulous treasure hoards these spirits were supposed to guard.

While he downed the double order of roast beef, hot biscuits and coffee, Hatfield reviewed in his mind the day's events. With Dan Thorp's death, he had lost the first round. But Thorp's dying words, although their meaning was shrouded in mystery, had convinced him that there was more than just an extortion gang at work in Ocotillo Valley.

Thorp had gasped, "Tell Webb—loot's hid—" And Jeff Ryder had mentioned Webb Addison, Janet's father. Thorp and Webb Addison were stepbrothers, and Thorp had been trying to reveal to his stepbrother where the "loot" was hidden. What was the loot at which the dying man had hinted?

Whatever it was, it was logical to assume that it was at the root of the trouble in this mountain valley. Knowledge of its whereabouts had brought Dan Thorp death. It was just as logical to assume that Addison, Thorp's stepbrother, also possessed the secret. Hatfield decided to see Webb Addison as soon as possible.

Remembering Janet Addison's fresh golden beauty, his pulses stirred. His own existence had been too swift and perilous to include a woman, but he had seen enough of them on the wild Texas frontiers to appreciate deeply their courage and loyalty and fighting qualities when the need arose. He didn't blame Jeff Ryder for falling in love with this one.

He was withholding judgment on fat, blustery Sheriff Starke. But he wouldn't be hesitant at placing full trust and confidence in Jeff Ryder.

The Ranger paid for his meal, turned

toward the door. As he went through the doorway, two other men started into the restaurant from the street. They were, Hatfield saw, Turk Laval and the giant Ike Toombs.

Hatfield, already in the doorway, clearly had the right-of-way. But Laval, in the lead, walked straight ahead, colliding sharply with the big Ranger.

Although Hatfield knew it was deliberate, he would have stepped aside with an apology to avoid trouble. But it was immediately obvious that Laval didn't want it that way.

"Why don't yuh stay out of the way, yuh cussed saddlebum?" he snapped, and followed this with an epithet no Texan would take.

Hatfield struck out instinctively, with the speed of a striking rattler and the force of a pile-driver. The blow caught Laval on the chin, hurled him backward into the street, where he lay dazed and writhing in the dust. Sharply angry, Hatfield stepped out into the street.

He heard a growling, animal-like sound, and whirled. It had taken the slow-witted Ike Toombs several seconds to realize what was happening. But now he was shuffling slowly forward, an enraged snarl on his thick lips, the hand holding the keenlashed bullwhip flashing backward.

That lead-tipped lash, Hatfield knew, in the giant's expert and powerful hands, was more dangerous than a bowie knife. With unbelievable quickness, he drew one of the black-handled six-shooters, and fired.

CHAPTER V

The Crusade

CONVULSIVELY, the giant's hand jerked, and splinters flew from the whip stock an inch from the thick fingers. The murderous weapon fell to the street. Ike Toombs stared dazedly at his empty hand, as if unable to understand what had happened.

Although sharply angered by the treacherous attack, Hatfield had no desire to kill. He had shot the bullwhip from the blond giant's hand, as he had shot guns from the hands of other men who were trying to kill him.

The Ranger stepped quickly backward, placed his back to the building he had just left. His gray-green eyes had gone as cold as a blizzard-lashed Northland lake. Turk Laval had rolled over, was getting slowly to his feet. Blood was running over one side of the rancher's dark face.

Men were converging swiftly on the spot, drawn by the promise of violence. Among them Hatfield recognized several of Laval's tough-looking riders. The Lone Wolf knew that unless he acted quickly he might find himself in a tough spot.

Ike Toombs' slow-moving mind had focused at last. With a wicked curse, he swooped for the whip. A bullet from Hatfield's gun geysered dust into his eyes.

"Let it lay, feller, or I'll blow yuh apart!" the Ranger's voice lashed out. "And you, Laval, call off yore wolves. Quick—or the dust in this street'll be a lot redder than it is!"

Laval calmly brushed dust from his dark trousers, watching Hatfield. He must have known Hatfield's deadliness now, and that he was not bluffing. But Laval showed no fear.

"Behave yourself, Ike," he said quietly, unhurriedly, to the scowling giant. "I didn't tell you to butt in. Somebody, sometime, will put a bullet into your brain —if you've got one!"

Laval's men were coming up swiftly, hands on gun-butts.

"I told yuh, Laval." The Ranger's voice was almost a purr. "Or had yuh rather die? I get jumpy when I'm crowded."

"I underestimated you, tall man. It won't happen again." Without turning his head, the dark rancher called, "Go on back to your drinking, boys. You're not needed here."

The oncoming toughs hesitated, look at each other, stopped. But obviously they were accustomed to obeying without question. They turned and moved back along the street.

As Toombs stooped again to pick up the splintered whip, Laval said:

"I think your toy's ruined, Ike. Leave it, and come on inside."

Growling, the giant glowered with hate-filled eyes at Hatfield. Laval stepped past the Ranger without another glance and entered the restaurant, followed by Toombs. Belatedly, Sheriff Starke came

waddling up, his face red and perspiring.

"What's the trouble here?" he demanded. "I don't allow drunken brawlin' in my —Oh, it's you, Lash! I might of knowed it! What's the ruckus about?"

Hatfield holstered his gun. "It's all over, Sheriff."

"Wasn't that Turk Laval and his bulldog yuh was fightin'?" The sheriff lowered his voice. "Mister, yuh shore like yore meat tough! Turk Laval is pizen, savvy? There's talk of him bein' behind all this devilment. Me, I don't know—but was I you I'd dodge that hombre like a pup dodgin' a sidewinder."

"Thanks," Hatfield murmured.

He stepped onto the plank walk and cruised slowly toward the lower end of town.

Laval had deliberately sought the clash, he ruminated. Had it been because of his natural arrogance, or was there something more significant behind it? Hatfield shrugged, tucked the problem away in his mind for future reference. If possible, he wanted to see and talk with Janet Addison. And then he wanted to converse with her father.

"In a hurry, tall man?"

Hatfield started, turned his head to look at the man who accosted him. The fellow was unbelievably skinny, rather old. He was standing in the doorway of a shabby building the Ranger was passing. The oldster's ink-stained shirt sleeves were rolled above bony elbows, a green eye-shade covered his alert, oddly piercing eyes.

Hatfield glanced at the neat lettering on the plate glass window:

THE CLARION
Hannibal Haines, Owner and Editor

"No hurry," the Ranger said, and paused. "Lookin' for a story?"

"I'm always looking for a story, my friend. I saw what happened a moment ago. It intrigued me, mainly because I knew you were the man who brought Dan Thorp's body in. That is a story—rather it's a part of one which has been unfolding a long time and is not yet ended. Would you care to step inside, and have a drink?"

"And talk?" Hatfield grinned. "I'm afraid I can't help yuh much, Mr. Haines, but I'll take yuh up on that drink."

HE STEPPED through the doorway into the print shop. The single room, as was to be expected, was littered. It contained an old desk, a wire waste-basket, an old press, type cases, and other appurtenances. Hannibal Haines motioned to a padded keg chair, and the Ranger sat down. Then the skinny old editor produced a bottle and two glasses.

Hatfield was not much of a drinking man, but he hoisted one with Haines. Newspaper editors, he had learned from experience, were usually an excellent source of information.

On the scarred desk lay a sheet of paper, and heavily lettered with a pencil across the top of the sheet were the words:

EL GATO STRIKES AGAIN!

Dan Thorp Killed from Ambush!

WHO WILL BE NEXT

Underneath the caption was the beginning of an editorial.

Killing and thievery are still rampant in Ocotillo Valley, menacing our homes, our very lives, while our noble sheriff loafs in his office and counts the whisky bottles he has drunk dry. . . .

"The truth," Hatfield said drily, "is sometimes dangerous—for the one who tells it."

"For me, my friend, it would be more dangerous not to tell it," Hannibal Haines declared. "Bullets can only kill me. But to know the truth, and not publish it, when by doing so I might prevent untold suffering and even save lives, then that would be worse than death. Some things a man may hide from or run away from, but he must live with himself forever."

Hatfield glanced sharply at the old editor. At first he had thought the oldster was being facetious. Then he saw the intense, burning flame in Hannibal's eyes, and he knew that here was a man with lofty ideals and fixed purposes; a man in whom the crusading spirit burned brightly, and who, knowing the evils and injustices that were rampant in this frontier land he chose to call home, wished passionately to see these things supplanted by right and justice and security.

"Does that sound odd to you?" the editor asked whimsically.

Hatfield shook his head. "To hear an honest man speak otherwise would be odd. Yet I take it there are a good many on this range who sing different tunes."

"Most of them just keep their mouths shut," said Haines. "Not that they are less brave than I am. They have families to think of, while my death would be no great loss to anybody."

"The death of a man who fights for law and justice is always a great loss," the Ranger said soberly, "whether he fights with guns, printer's ink on in some other fashion. So yuh want the story of Dan Thorp's death?"

"As much of it as you care to tell me."

Hatfield glanced sharply at the bony editor, then told him simply the story he had told Sheriff Starke. As before, he omitted all mention of the rancher's dying words.

"Yuh got any idea who El Gato really is?" he asked bluntly, when he had finished.

"If I did, if I *knew*, you may be sure that his identity would already have been revealed to the proper persons," Haines told him grimly. "This valley is being ruined. Men and women have died, and others will die, unless this human snake and his gang are wiped out. Have you any idea who he is?"

Hatfield shrugged. "Why should I? I'm just a saddle drifter, a stranger in Ocotillo Valley."

"For a stranger, you've managed to stir up pretty much of a hornet's nest," observed the editor. "If you tarry long, watch out for Turk Laval—and don't trust some others too far."

"Meanin' who?"

"Judge for yourself, Mr. Lash."

It seemed to Hatfield that the bespectacled oldster put a particular emphasis on the last word. And he again had the feeling that the editor suspected that he was not exactly what he pretended to be.

"I might tarry a while, at that," Hatfield said, "if I can find a ridin' job. Could yuh tell me how to get to Webb Addison's Half Moon outfit?"

"Webb Addison?" Hannibal Haines looked shrewdly at the tall Ranger. "In case you didn't know, Addison and Dan Thorp are stepbrothers. You take the west trail—" The editor paused, gesturing with an ink-stained thumb through a front window. "There goes Janet Addison now. She can show you the way better than I could tell you."

GLANCING out, Hatfield saw Janet on her palomino riding slowly along the street, making a picture of grace and beauty that would linger for a long time in his mind.

"Thanks," he said. "And mebbe I'll be seein' yuh again."

"I'm pretty sure of it," Hannibal said, smiling, and watched as the big Ranger strode from the office and along the street toward the livery stable.

At the livery, Hatfield saddled Goldy, mounted, and rode leisurely out of town in the direction Janet Addison had taken. Beyond the last straggling buildings, he lifted the sorrel to a gallop, and two miles out of San Jon he saw the girl on the trail ahead of him. She was riding along at an unhurried canter.

Hearing the sorrel's hoofbeats, the girl glanced back, then stopped the palomino and swung about on the trail to wait for him. She smiled as he came up, showing no surprise, but rather seemed to have expected him to follow her out of town....

Meanwhile, back in town, Sheriff Judd Starke drank deeply from his almost empty bottle, got up and left his office. He shambled along the plank walk, looking like an ungainly red bear, his long-barreled guns slapping against his fat thighs. He turned in at Hannibal Haines' print shop.

Hannibal was busy on his story. He glanced up as the sheriff entered, nodded without warmth. Starke shuffled up close to the scarred desk and stopped, staring at the piece of paper on which the editor had been scribbling.

"Busy?" the lawman asked.

"I'm always busy," Hannibal said. "Lazy hands, and minds, are tools of the devil—and I didn't originate that. What can I do for you?"

"Just wanted a few words with yuh," Starke mumbled. "Reckon yuh heard about Dan Thorp havin' an accident?"

"I heard about him being killed," snapped Haines. "And if I were sheriff, I'd be doing something about it right now."

The sheriff spread fat hands. "I'll do somethin', all right. That's what I wanted

to talk about. Too much talk, too much publicity, might hold me back."

Hannibal grimaced sardonically. It wasn't the first time he had talked along these lines with the sheriff.

"You mean," he said grimly, "you don't want me to print the story of Dan Thorp's death. Is that right?"

"Well, not exactly. Yuh might just say he's dead. That ought to be enough, hadn't it?"

"No, it's not enough!" The gaunt editor slapped the desk-top angrily with his palm. "Dan Thorp was killed, in cold blood. Maybe he deserved to die, but that's no excuse for his killers."

"What yuh mean by that?" demanded the lawman.

"Figure it out for yourself! That is beside the point. The point is, El Gato has claimed another life. Unless something is done he will claim others."

"That's just what I'm talkin' about!" wheezed the sheriff. "The stuff yuh've been printin' just makes him mad, drives him to more killin's for revenge. If yuh'd just soft-pedal this now, until I can do somethin', it might help a lot."

"Sheriff, you're wastin' your breath!" The editor now spoke quietly, but his thin features were white and drawn with the intensity of his emotions. "Since El Gato started his thieving and killing, I've fought him, and you, in the only way I know how—with the printed word. I'll continue to do so just as long as I can draw a breath!

"This bandit and his kind must go. So long as they are allowed to pursue their evil ways unmolested, then just that long will the rightful progress of Texas be retarded. That long will honest, decent folks who some day will make the state great, remain where there is greater safety. And now, Sheriff, I've got to get out a paper!"

"I'm warnin' yuh, Haines, yuh're makin' a mistake!" The lawman's whisky-flushed face flamed even redder, his pale eyes were narrowed coldly. "Yuh're interferin' with the law, obstructin' justice. I could jail yuh for that."

"Do it, then," the editor said hotly. "I'll write what I have to say in a cell, or shout it through the bars—anyway to light the spark among the decent folks of this valley that will blow El Gato to Hades! I'll tell the truth, so far as I know it, about Dan Thorp's death. I'll continue to lampoon you, Sheriff, for your drunkenness and stupidity. Arrest me, if you dare—or get out and let me work!"

Sheriff Starke shook a huge fist.

"Remember, I warned yuh," he shouted. "Yuh're blockin the law, mebbe even causin' more deaths, by refusin' to do what I say!"

He whirled and scuttled like an enormous red spider from the office.

CHAPTER VI

The Half Moon

RIDING slowly along the trail with Hatfield, heading toward the Half Moon, Janet Addison finished her confession.

"And that's why I lied," she admitted soberly. "I was miles away from the spot where you rescued Uncle Dan from the quicksand, only to see him killed by El Gato's men a moment later. When I told the sheriff I had seen what happened, I was pretty sure you were a Ranger."

"What gave yuh that idea?" Hatfield asked cautiously.

"Because I knew that Uncle Dan had written Austin asking for help from the Rangers. He told me. You are a Ranger, aren't you?"

Making a swift decision, the Lone Wolf nodded. "My name's Hatfield, instead of Lash. Does anybody else know that Thorp wrote for Ranger help?"

"I don't think so," Janet said. "I know I've told nobody, because Uncle Dan asked me not to, not even my father."

"It's all right for yore father to know," Hatfield told her, "but nobody else, at least for the present. I'm sorry I was too late to help yore uncle."

"So am I, but it can't be helped now. Maybe you can help others, though. I—nobody knows where El Gato will strike next. I've been frightened. The things he and his men do are so cruel, sometimes so senseless. He must be captured, or killed!"

"He will be," the Ranger assured her grimly. "Did yore uncle tell you why he asked for Ranger help?"

"He said he'd received a note from El Gato, demanding money."

"Nothin' else?"

"Why, no." Janet looked puzzled. "What else could there have been?"

Hatfield shook his head. There had been something else, as he very well knew. Dan Thorp had held some secret, a secret El Gato wanted badly, and the secret had died with the rancher.

"Yore uncle hadn't seemed nervous, or scared, lately?" the Ranger asked.

"Yes, he had, now that you mention it," the girl admitted. "He'd lost a lot of weight, and several times I heard him complain that he couldn't sleep at night. But others are frightened, too, and I didn't see anything unusual about it at the time. Was there something else?"

"It's my job to find out," Hatfield said evasively.

It was almost sundown when they reached the Half Moon. It obviously was a sizable outfit. The well-kept ranch buildings huddled in the shade of towering pines and cottonwoods at the head of an earthen dam behind which clear water sparkled in the late sun. The surroundings blazed with color from giant yucca, Spanish dagger, poppies and sunflowers which grew in profusion. Never, Hatfield thought, had he seen a more inviting place.

Several punchers loafed near the low bunkhouse, talking and smoking. Seeing Hatfield with Janet Addison was sufficient to win him their friendly grins. Two of them took charge of their horses and led them toward the nearby barn.

Hatfield walked with Janet toward the rambling old ranchhouse. He had already seen the man standing on the portico, waiting for them.

Webb Addison was a big, handsome man of perhaps fifty. He was wearing range garb, and his graying hair was bare. He looked curiously, and with apparent suspicion, at Hatfield.

Janet kissed her father lightly.

"Father, have you heard?" she asked.

"About Dan, yuh mean?" A worried frowned creased Addison's brow, but about him the Ranger could detect little grief, such as might be expected to result from the death of a stepbrother. "Yes, I heard about it an hour ago. I was just gettin' ready to ride into town. Who is this hombre, Janet?"

"Come inside." Janet said quietly.

They went into a shadowy hall, then into a big, cool room at the front of the house. Obviously it was Addison's room, for it contained a man's furnishings. The walls were decorated with pictures of beautiful horses and dogs, with mounted heads of deer, bear, mountain lion and peccary.

Janet introduced the two men, and in a few words explained to her father what Jim Hatfield was and his reason for being in Ocotillo Valley. The Ranger, watching Webb Addison closely, saw the rancher's eyes narrow slightly, but beyond this he still showed no emotion at all. Hatfield's reaction was that, while Addison was deeply nervous or worried, he was closely on guard against something.

"Did Dan Thorp mention in his letter to Ranger headquarters why he needed help?" Addison asked.

"No, except that he'd received a note from El Gato. I thought mebbe you could shed some more light on that."

ADDISON shook his head, glanced at Janet.

"Evidently my daughter didn't explain that part of it to yuh. Durin' the last several years my stepbrother hadn't been on my place, nor I on his. We had a—well, a kind of fallin' out."

Concealing his surprise at this news, Hatfield looked at the girl. Her eyes were averted, her face flushed.

"How could I explain it?" she asked. "I've never known what the quarrel was about."

Addison started to say something, wet his lips, obviously changed his mind and said something else.

"Never mind, child. It didn't concern you: Bring us coffee and somethin' to eat, will yuh?"

The girl obediently left the room.

Hatfield waited for Addison to speak.

"What my stepbrother and me quarreled about doesn't concern you either, Hatfield," the rancher finally said. "It was—personal. Dan's gone now, and it's forgotten. I'd like to thank yuh for tryin' to save Dan. And if I can help yuh in any way, I will."

"That depends." Addison, Hatfield decided, was concealing something, but decided not to press the point. "Yuh don't have any idea who El Gato really is?"

"No more than anybody else knows," the rancher declared quickly. "Names have been mentioned, of course, but I don't know."

"Turk Laval, for instance?" asked the Ranger.

"Yes, among others. But so far as I know it's only talk, no proof. And so far as I know, no honest man in the basin has ever seen El Gato, and lived to tell it."

"And no idea where the hideout of the bunch is?"

"That's a little different," declared Addison. "It's pretty certain that their den, if they have one, is somewheres in the Devil's Playground over in the southern end of the valley. Several times they've been trailed in there, and their sign lost. Mebbe, after they get into the badlands, they just scatter and head out separately. I don't know."

"They've never bothered you?"

"Not yet." Webb Addison got up and paced the floor nervously. "But I don't mind sayin' I'm worried sick. A month ago I sent my wife out to Denver to stay with her folks. Tried to get Janet to go, but she refused. Somethin's got to be done! I didn't know Dan had written the Rangers, but I'm glad he did. I'd been considerin' it myself. This valley is like one big funeral, with fear creepin' over it like a paralysis. Folks can't stand much more of it, I tell yuh!"

"Mebbe they won't have to, if I get some cooperation." The tall Ranger's words came blunt and swift then. "Yore stepbrother wasn't killed because he refused to give this bandit money. He died because he knew where some kind of loot was hid, and El Gato wanted the secret! What kind of loot was it, Addison?"

Addison had started violently, swung about to face Hatfield. His face had paled and globules of sweat stood out on his forehead. He fought to regain control of himself.

"Loot?" he blurted. "Yuh must be loco, Ranger! I don't know anything about any loot, and I don't believe Dan did either. What makes yuh think that?"

"Somethin' Dan Thorp said just before he died. He tried to tell me where the loot was hid, so I could tell you, but died before he could get it out."

"I don't know where any loot's hid," Addison said.

"That's what Thorp was tryin' to get across to yuh when he died." The Ranger's voice was stern. "I represent the State of Texas, Addison. If you know anything that might help to break this case, to bring criminals to justice, it's yore duty to cooperate."

Addison had regained his composure. He sat down again. Although his face remained pale and drawn, his eyes were sullen, almost defiant.

"I told yuh I'd help yuh if I could," he said, "and I meant it. But if my stepbrother told yuh what yuh say he did, it's a mystery to me. I never—"

He broke off abruptly, as Janet reentered the room with a tray that held food and coffee.

They ate there in the front room. By now the sun had set, with shadows racing swiftly down from the frowning Chisos that served as a backdrop for the ranch buildings. Janet had touched a match to a swinging lamp.

A FEELING of bafflement was inside the big Ranger, making him almost angry. Twice, he felt sure, he had been close to clearing up an important part of the mystery—once just before Thorp died, and again just now—and both times the opportunity had slipped from his grasp. Webb Addison, he felt sure, for some reason had lied. The rancher knew to what Thorp had alluded when he mentioned "loot", but Addison refused to admit it.

Jim Hatfield had long since learned the virtue of patience, the art of concealing his innermost emotions or thoughts. While puzzling over the situation, he chatted amiably with Addison and Janet. Finally Addison glanced at his watch, and with an apology got to his feet.

"Time I was gettin' into town to see about funeral arrangements for poor Dan," he declared. "I reckon we'll bury him tomorrer. Hatfield, yuh can bed down here in the house tonight."

Hatfield nodded. "Reckon I'll turn in pretty early. I've been on the move pretty steady the last several days."

Addison went out, leaving Hatfield and the girl alone in the room. Neither of them spoke for a while. Janet seemed slightly embarrassed.

"I know you think I've been holding out on you," she said finally, impulsively.

"And while it's true that I knew relations between Father and Uncle Dan had been strained for the last several years, I don't know what the quarrel was about. I tried to find out from Father at first, but he always laughed, told me not to worry my head about it."

"Did yuh hear what yore father and I talked about?" asked the Ranger.

"About the loot, you mean?" She nodded. "I couldn't help hearing part of it. But I don't have the slightest idea what that is about either. Do you believe that?"

"I believe you," Hatfield said quietly, and meant it.

CHAPTER VII

Range of Fear

JIM HATFIELD spent most of the next day riding over Ocotillo Valley, getting the lay of the land. He visited several small ranches, ostensibly seeking water or food, but in reality seeking some lead that might help him cut El Gato's sign.

But at each ranch the result was practically the same. Everywhere he was regarded with suspicion and distrust. In all eyes lay shadows of fear. Terror inspired by El Gato lay like a blight over the range.

At the ranches Hatfield visited he was shown due courtesy, as the Western code demanded, but the ranchers were never far from their guns. Many of them had sent their families to visit distant relatives.

The Lone Wolf's green-gray eyes took on a harder, colder sheen, as evidence of the bandit's satanic cruelty piled up. El Gato was not a man, but a devil, a pestilence that had infected an entire range.

Hatfield rode at a leisurely gait, always alert, but nevertheless keenly aware of his unusual surroundings. Never had he visited a land of such magnitude and grandeur. This section, he knew, had once been a great inland sea. Here had been discovered fossils of giant oysters, mammoth claws, sea turtles, sharks' teeth. Here gigantic sea serpents had lived and fought and died.

For years these wild mountains, deserts and narrow valleys had been the stamping grounds of marauding Apaches and white renegades. For scores of years prospectors had roamed the wilderness searching for the numerous fabled lodes of gold and silver.

Indian and Mexican legend peopled the mysterious mountains with evil spirits which guarded inaccessible treasure caves. Many of these tales, Hatfield knew, were more than legends, just as he knew that through here—possibly through this very valley—had come early Spanish explorers in their quest of the mythical Seven Cities of the Cibolians.

During this first day's ride the tall Ranger witnessed incredible contrasts: Turreted mountains towering like dark and hostile gods over him; rich rangeland slashed by sparkling streams; sere desertland; timbered hills, and hills of brilliant red cinnabar ore with which ancient races had painted their weird pictographs on walls and boulders. He saw golden eagles with a seven-foot wingspread, a petrified tree ten feet in diameter, a two-hundred foot waterfall, and he saw an Indian on a "dry drunk" from chewing on mescal buttons.

The night before, which had been misty, he had seen weird, phosphorescent streamers hovering over the mountain tops, giving them a ghostlike appearance.

The sun was sinking low toward the mountains, painting them with barbaric colors, when Hatfield paused at a small ranchhouse in the shadows of red walls. After this last pause, for a drink of water which both he and Goldy now really needed, he planned to head back for the Half Moon.

As the Ranger stopped before the log ranchhouse, he was aware of two things —a woman trying to rope a horse inside a pole corral, and the loud crying of a baby inside the house. The horse, a rangy roan, was wild, and plunged from one end to the other of the corral. Hatfield saw that the woman, while adept enough with the rope, was unlikely to snare the roan.

He rode over to the corral, swung to the ground.

"I beg yore pardon, ma'am," he said courteously. "Can I help yuh?"

The woman, who had been unaware of his presence, whirled with a startled gasp. She was young, dark-eyed, rather pretty.

She stared wide-eyed at the Ranger, hand at her throat.

"You—are you—" she stammered.

"Yuh needn't be afraid," Hatfield told her gently. "I'm not what yuh're thinkin'. I only stopped for a drink of water for myself and my hoss."

"You're welcome to water." She had a low, rich voice. "There's a spring over at the base of the walls, and a dipper."

INSIDE the cabin the baby was still wailing. "It can wait," Hatfield said. "Yuh seem to want that bronc pretty badly, ma'am. Yuh here alone with the baby?"

"Yes—the baby and me."

"Then the baby needs yuh. Mebbe I can help yuh. What did yuh want with the roan?"

"I wanted to go look for my husband." Her words came in a rush now. "His name's Sam Logan. He left early this morning, to mend a fence at Silver Springs over on the west part of the range. It shouldn't have taken more than two hours, and he promised to be back by noon. But he wasn't, and he still hasn't shown up. I've been worried sick, what with—with the things that have been happening. I'm sure he would have been back long ago if something hadn't happened to him. I—I didn't know what to do, having the baby and all, but a little while ago I decided to go look for him."

"Go back to yore baby," Jim Hatfield said quickly, "and stop worryin'. Tell me how to get to Silver Springs, and I'll find yore husband. Likely he just found more fences to mend and decided to finish the job before comin' home."

Relief flooded the young woman's face. She left the corral, gave swift, precise instructions on how to reach the spring where Sam Logan had gone to mend a broken fence. Minutes later, after both he and Goldy had had their fill of the cold, sparkling spring water, he rode at a gallop away from the ranch cabin.

Although the woman's worry had been real enough, the Ranger considered it unlikely that Sam Logan was in real danger unless he'd had an accident. It wasn't likely that the Logans, obviously poor, would have enough wealth to tempt El Gato.

He found Silver Springs without trouble, a small stream trickling from the rocky earth at the foot of a wall. Hatfield halted the sorrel. At first he saw no sign of anybody, or of anything unusual. Nearby was a fence.

The Ranger's eyes, following the fence's course, suddenly narrowed. There, a hundred feet away, was a stretch of unmended fence. On the ground were an ax, a hammer and a sack of staples. Twenty feet farther on, was a man's hat.

Hatfield rode to the stretch of broken fence, alert for the danger that he knew lurked—or had lurked—near this spot. He swung from saddle, picked up the hat. The sweat-band was dry, evidence that it had lain there in the sun for quite some time. The Ranger's keen eyes scanned the earth, reading the sign that was there.

In the soft earth were the boot prints of several men. The marks plainly showed the signs of a struggle.

The whinny of a horse came suddenly to Hatfield's ears. He whirled, hands stab-

[*Turn page*]

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

bing for the black Colts. But he didn't draw them. The horse stood fifty yards away, partly concealed by a patch of mesquite, head turned to stare at the Ranger curiously. The horse, a buckskin, was saddled and bridled.

Hatfield went toward the horse, leading Goldy, hands on gun-butts. He was halfway to the animal when he heard another sound, that of a human voice. The voice seemed wordless, a hoarse, strangled cry filled with unreasoning terror and hopelessness. The sound had come from somewhere beyond the horse.

Hatfield plunged forward. He raced past the horse—and rocked back on his heels, appalled by what he saw.

A man, a young, sandy-haired man, had been bound to the trunk of a pine tree, a rope wound round and round his body and arms so that he could move only his head. Sam Logan, Hatfield knew at once, and on Logan's face and in his eyes was naked horror, as he stared downward at the ground near his feet.

Hatfield's own gaze shifted, and the horror that the bound man felt coursed like a dark stream through the Ranger's own powerful body. There on the ground, only inches from the prisoner's legs, was a giant rattlesnake, coiled and ready to strike!

In that breathless instant, before his hands swept downward for the twin guns, the Lone Wolf's trained eyes read the story. He saw the rattler's wicked, wedge-shaped head lash out. But the lethal fangs never reached their mark.

A bare two inches from the bound man's quivering leg, the reptile's head was brought up short, and the snake's huge mottled body lashed the ground as it drew itself again into coils.

HATFIELD saw that the snake, like Logan, was bound! A light stake had been driven into the ground. One end of a cord had been looped about the smallest part of the rattler's body, just behind the wedged head, while the other end of the cord was tied to the stake.

The cord had been adjusted with such diabolical cunning that, when the infuriated rattler struck, its poison-dripping fangs lacked only an inch or two of reaching their mark.

These things Hatfield saw in a single sweep of his eyes. Then the black guns were in his hands, blazing and roaring. The rattler's head seemed literally to explode and vanish in a red gory mess. Its coils, released from the cord, writhed and threshed in its death throes. Hatfield, with rage and revulsion inside him, stepped quickly forward and kicked the thing aside.

Logan had lifted his eyes and was staring at his rescuer, reason and thanksgiving driving some of the dark terror from his gaze. He tried to speak, wet his lips, tried again.

"Take it easy," the Ranger advised gently. "I'll have yuh loose from here pronto. The skunks that done this anywheres close?"

Logan shook his head. "Don't—think so," he mumbled.

Within seconds the ropes were cut, and Sam Logan was free. He was so weak, from exhaustion and his terrifying ordeal, that he almost collapsed. Hatfield eased him to the ground.

"I—don't think I could have stood it much longer," the rancher declared hoarsely. "I guess I kind of—passed out—several times. Figgered I had as much sand as the next hombre, but I reckon not."

"Yuh've got plenty sand," the Ranger assured him. "Men have died from less. Not many would have stayed conscious, or sane, after what yuh went through. Who done it?"

"Four-five hombres. Strangers to me. They rode up while I was fixin' fence over there, and got the drop on me. Said they belonged to El Gato's crew and that their leader had sent 'em to get me. I tried to put up a fight then, but I didn't have a chance."

"Had yuh got any message from El Gato, askin' for money, or anything?" asked Hatfield.

"No. That's why I can't savvy it. Well, I asked 'em what they aimed to do with me, and they just laughed and said wait and see. They brought me here to this tree and tied me like yuh saw. Then they took that bull rattler from a sack. I still didn't know what they were up to, even when they drove that stake into the ground there beside me. But when they looped one end of a cord about the rattler's neck, and tied the other end to the

stake, then I knew."

As the rancher's story unfolded, Hatfield realized that it had been a deliberate scheme for fiendish torture that was to end in death for the victim. Periodically, the raging snake had stabbed its poisonous fangs a hairbreadth from the bound man's flesh. Sooner or later, within minutes or hours, as the outlaws had pointed out with sadistic enjoyment, the thin cord would break under the force of the rattler's vicious lunges. Or the small stake, driven lightly into the soft earth, would be uprooted.

Then the slashing fangs would find their mark.

The almost unbearable torment had been in the waiting, knowing that any minute was liable to bring horrible death. Only the Ranger's arrival had saved Logan.

More than once Jim Hatfield, to save his own life or those of others, had been forced to kill. But he bitterly hated deliberate violence or cruelty. And here was cruelty in its most degenerate and inhuman form. Never had the Lone Wolf lawman known a more turbulent anger than that which boiled inside him now.

Here was indisputable proof, if he had needed it, of El Gato's utter ruthlessness and soullessness. But, like Logan, he could not guess the motive behind this act. Logan, a new settler in the valley, had no money, no way of raising any. He had neither said nor done anything to incur the bandit's enmity. The young rancher was dazed by what had happened.

"Take yore wife and baby and ride into town," Hatfield advised him as they rode back toward the ranchhouse. "Stay there till this mess is cleared up, then yuh can come back to yore home."

"I'll do that," Logan agreed gratefully. "But come on back to the cabin with me, Lash. My wife'll want to thank you."

The Lone Wolf smiled, shook his head. Logan's thanks made him uneasy enough. From the dark-eyed woman they would be harder to take.

"Just keep that wife and kid under cover till El Gato's mangy hide is nailed to the fence," he said. "That's all the thanks I want. Mebbe I'll see yuh again then."

Logan reluctantly accepted Hatfield's decision, watched with admiration as the stalwart rider and the golden gelding vanished over a ridge. Then he rode swiftly toward the log ranchhouse where a dark-eyed girl anxiously awaited him.

CHAPTER VIII

Loot of Death

LOPING along the trail, Hatfield headed on a straight course back toward the Half Moon. On the surface he had accomplished little, beyond saving a man's life. But he wasn't discouraged with the day's work. He had learned that incidents or observations, however insignificant appearing at the time, might later prove important.

He hit the trail a mile below the ranchhouse, and almost collided with a rider heading along the dusk-shrouded trail toward San Jon. The rider was Editor Hannibal Haines, mounted on a dun as skinny as its rider, both looking like animated scarecrows as they bounced along the trail.

Hannibal immediately pulled up as he saw Hatfield, satisfaction lighting his bony features.

"Good evening, friend Lash," he said, again placing emphasis on the name. "I've just been to the Half Moon hoping to see you. They told me you'd been gone all day, and so I'd headed back to town."

"Somethin' wrong?" Hatfield asked quickly.

"Nothing more than usual. I merely wished to chew the fat with you, as they say."

"*Bueno.* Mebbe we can chew better with somethin' more solid than a saddle under us."

The meeting had been made where a small, spring-fed stream crossed the trail, and now they dismounted and seated themselves on the grassy bank. The sun had set and a cool wind was blowing. A yellow moon had soared above the mountains to the east.

"I'll come straight to the point," Hannibal said bluntly, "because I think I can convince you I'm on your side."

"I was convinced of that five minutes after I'd first met you," the Ranger inter-

rupted, smiling. "And let me say it. You know my name's not Jim Lash, but Hatfield, and that I'm a Texas Ranger. Is that right?"

"A bull's eye. When I first saw you I knew I'd seen you somewhere before, or your picture, but I couldn't place you. I got to rummaging among my back files, and found it. Several years ago I ran a story about you, with your picture, after you'd cleaned out that gang in the Panhandle. But I assure you that your secret is quite safe with me."

"I'm shore of it," said the Ranger. "Did yuh ride out here just to tell me that?"

"No, I didn't," the editor admitted. "Not being sure of you when we talked the other time, I didn't tell quite all I knew —or suspected."

"Neither are some others I could name," Hatfield said grimly. "Webb Addison, for instance."

"You're probably right, although I of course don't know what he has told you. If Dan Thorp could have talked before he died, I think he could have cleared up a lot. What I have to say is largely guesswork, and therefore may have no value. That's for you to decide."

"I'm listenin'," said Hatfield.

"Did you ever hear of Don Gregorio Mateo, otherwise known as *El Lobo Rojo* —the Red Wolf?"

Hatfield nodded readily. "Up until about fifteen years ago El Lobo Rojo was a powerful bandit chieftain below the Border in the mountains of Chihuahua. He was killed, rumors had it, in some kind of mysterious raid on his hideout one night."

"It was more than a rumor," Hannibal Haines declared. "And I think it was also more than rumor that in his many forays over wide areas, he had collected a very rich treasure trove—bar gold, pigs of silver, and other precious metals that he looted from the wagon trains starting up the old Chihuahua trail. Even diamonds, sapphires and pearl necklaces from Mexico's beautiful and wealthy women. These immensely rich treasures, or part of them at least, Rojo was said to have kept in his mountain hideout so he could gloat over them. It's pretty certain that this much concerning Don Mateo was true."

"Not much doubt of it," the Lone Wolf agreed. "The mountains across the Rio were, and still are, filled with his kind. But go on with the story."

THE editor went on.

"Although I can't be certain that the rest of it is true," he said, "I believe it to be so. The tale is that about fifteen years ago a band of Texans crossed the Rio Grande into Chihuahua, bent on robbing Rojo of his ill-gotten treasure. They approached the hideout undetected, and in the dark of night suddenly swooped down upon the unsuspecting outlaws. Quite a few of the bandits, including El Lobo Rojo himself, were killed outright. And surprise, and the savagery of their attack, enabled the raiders to gain possession of a huge chestful of loot and make their escape.

"But the escape was not complete. El Lobo Rojo's second in command was a young American—himself an outlaw north of the Border—named Nick Dorn. Dorn, and quite a few of his underlings, escaped unharmed from the raid, and Nick Dorn quickly organized pursuit.

"They overtook the treasure-weighted raiders just short of the river, and in the battle that followed every Texan, with the exception of two, was killed. These two unidentified raiders managed to slip across the river in the dark with the treasure chest."

"Then what?" Hatfield asked.

Hannibal Haines shrugged. "Then the treasure simply vanished. But that's not the end of the story. Ten years later, a little less than five years ago, Nick Dorn suddenly started operating in Ocotillo Valley with a big gang of killers. They kept the range terrorized for a year and a half, using much the same tactics that El Gato uses now.

"I thought then, and still do, that El Lobo Rojo's lieutenant, Dorn, had finally traced the bandit loot to this range and his real object was in locating and retrieving it. If that was it, however, he failed. Finally a rancher's posse cornered the gang, wiped out most of them and captured the remainder, including Nick Dorn himself.

"Until he was to be brought to trial, Dorn was being held in Sheriff Judd Starke's jail in San Jon. But one night a bunch of hot-heads got liquored up and started talking about taking the law into

their own hands. Starke, claiming he intended to take Nick Dorn over to the next county seat for safe-keeping, spirited Dorn away before the mob arrived.

"I saw the sheriff when he left with the prisoner, and I saw him when he returned several hours later, blood running over his face from a cut on the head. According to Starke's story, Dorn had struck him over the head with a rock in an attempt at escape. But the sheriff had shot Dorn several times, and had seen him fall into Perdition Gulch, a deep canyon with a swift stream at its bottom over in the southern end of the basin.

"Dorn's body was never found. But if he fell into Perdition Gulch, wounded or not, at the spot Sheriff Starke indicated, he wouldn't have had a chance to live. He was marked up as officially dead."

"So?" Hatfield murmured.

"The rest is even more guesswork," Hannibal declared. "There was some talk at the time, hinting that Dorn hadn't died, that Sheriff Starke had accepted a bribe from him and let him escape. But there was no proof of that either."

"What's yore idea?" the Ranger asked bluntly.

The skinny editor drew a deep breath. "I always have suspected that the sheriff let Nick Dorn go," he said, "although I've never mentioned it to anybody else because without a shred of proof it would be useless. My theory is that Dorn revealed to Sheriff Starke the presence of the stolen loot somewhere on this range, that in return for his freedom he promised Starke a share of the treasure when it was found. Does that sound crazy?"

"It's sounds reasonable, from what I've seen of Starke," said the Ranger. "But that's not all, is it? Yuh suspect that El Gato is really Nick Dorn, returned to Ocotillo Valley with a new gang and still after the treasure stolen from El Lobo Rojo. Is that right?"

"Yes. But still without actual proof, what can I do?"

"And that the two unidentified raiders who survived the battle with Nick Dorn's *bandidos* fifteen years ago, and escaped into Texas with the treasure chest, were Webb Addison and his stepbrother Dan Thorp?"

"I'm almost certain of it!" the editor said soberly.

IF IT hadn't been for the cascading flood of silvery moonlight, it would have been full dark by now. In the unreal light the Chisos lifted their dark, frowning faces against the sky like monstrous crouched beasts about to leap upon the two men. Along the crests of the eastern peaks, where the moonlight touched them, seemed to run a shimmering thread of liquid fire.

In the silence that followed Hannibal Haines' announcement, the croaking of the frogs along the creek was loud. A coyote cried dismally in the distance, and from a nearby belt of timber came the fierce cry of a hunting owl.

"These things," Hatfield thought, "hunt and kill to survive, while their human counterparts kill because of greed and the lust for power."

"Again, from what Thorp said just before he died," he went on, "also from Addison's actions, that seems reasonable. But is this also guess work, Haines, or have yuh got proof?"

"Only this: I know that at the time El Lobo Rojo's hideout was raided, about fifteen years ago, Thorp and Addison were absent from the valley for several days. And I know that, on two occasions during the last three years, Dan Thorp cashed bars of gold bullion."

"Which seems like pretty conclusive evidence," Hatfield murmured. "But Webb Addison denies knowledge of it. And he claims that him and his stepbrother hadn't been on good terms for several years."

"I know that to be a fact, too." The bespectacled editor nodded. "Nobody seemed to know what the quarrel was about, except Thorp and Addison, and they never told. Perhaps it doesn't matter, now that Dan Thorp is dead."

"Quien sabe?" murmured the big Ranger. "We can't afford to overlook any bets. If yore theory pans out, Webb Addison could be a big help in clearin' up this mess."

"But will he? Addison, so far as I know, has always been straight as a string. He's respected and liked here in the valley. But if he was one of the raiders who went into Chihuahua and brought back some bandit loot—even if the stuff had been stolen to start with by El Lobo Rojo—looks like that makes him guilty of some-

thing. He might not cooperate."

"I'll soon know," Hatfield said grimly. "Anything else yuh crave to get off yore chest?"

Hannibal shook his head. "That's what I wanted to tell you. I hope it helps. You can trust me to keep my mouth closed about your being a Ranger. And if I can help you in any way, just let me know."

"*Bueno!*" The Lone Wolf got to his feet with a quick, graceful movement of his magnificent body. "Yuh say yuh just came from the Half Moon. Everything all right there?"

"I remained only a few moments, only long enough to ascertain that you were away. Didn't even get off my horse." Hannibal Haines hesitated, rubbing his bony chin. "I talked with Addison. He acted strangely. When I called out, he wouldn't leave the house until I told who I was. Then he came out with a rifle in his hand. He seemed nervous, almost frightened. I didn't consider it so queer at the time, but now I don't know."

"Something might have happened." Hatfield stepped quickly into saddle. "I have to ride into town tomorrow for some stuff. I'll see yuh then."

He raised his hand, spoke softly to Goldy, and the sorrel lifted instantly into a ground-eating lope.

CHAPTER IX

The Raiders

AS HATFIELD rode along the trail toward the Half Moon he thought over what Hannibal Haines had just told him, and felt pretty certain that he was on the right trail. It tallied, like well-greased cogs, with what he already knew.

He decided to bring the issue squarely before Addison.

When he arrived at the ranch, light glowed behind drawn shades in the big front room of the Half Moon ranchhouse. The place was quiet. But as he rode up and stopped, Hatfield caught the vague stir of two figures, one at the corner of the ranchhouse, the other in the shadows of a yucca plant twenty yards away.

"Guards," the Ranger thought, and was immediately certain that something must have happened to cause this caution on Addison's part.

He heard the click of an eared-back hammer.

"Who is it?" one of the guards demanded. "Speak up, hombre!"

"Me, Jim Lash," Hatfield said, and sat still in the saddle.

The guard came forward from the yucca, gun in hand, and peered up at the rider.

"What's up?" Hatfield asked.

"Ask Addison," said the puncher. "He's in his room. Said tell yuh he wanted to see yuh when yuh showed up. I'll take yore bronc."

Hatfield swung to the ground, crossed the portico and stepped into the hall. Addison's door was closed. He rapped on the door, and heard Addison's sharp voice.

"Who is it, and what do yuh want?"

"Hatfield," said the Ranger. "Yuh crave to see me?"

"Come on in, Ranger."

Hatfield turned the knob, pushed open the heavy door, stepped through and closed the door behind him. Webb Addison was alone in the room. He sat at an old flat-topped desk, a half-empty bottle before him. The rancher's face was haggard, worry lay in his eyes. He seemed to have aged ten years since the night before. While Addison was not drunk, obviously he had been hitting the bottle pretty heavily.

Without rising, Addison motioned to a chair, and the Lone Wolf sat down.

"Well, Addison," the Ranger said, when Addison remained silent, "one of yore punchers said yuh wanted to see me. Is somethin' wrong?"

Without speaking, the rancher shoved a slip of wrinkled, soiled paper across the desk-top toward Hatfield. Picking up the paper, Hatfield saw that several sentences had been scrawled on it with a pencil. The note was addressed to Webb Addison, and said:

> You're next, Addison, unless you use your brains. It might come five minutes after you read this, it might be a week or a month from now, but you can't escape. The worst fate of all has been reserved for you. There's just one way to dodge it. You know what that way is!"

The note was signed by El Gato.

Hatfield looked up sharply. Addison was lifting the bottle to his lips. Quite obviously the courage had oozed from him

and he was trying desperately to recapture it with the whisky.

The rancher's hands were unsteady, his voice a little shrill when he spoke.

"Where've yuh been, Hatfield?" he demanded. "I've been waitin' for yuh for hours. Yuh're a Ranger, yuh're supposed to represent law and order, protect folks."

"Get hold of yoreself, Addison!" Hatfield said flatly. "Yuh're actin' like a snivelin' kid. Where'd yuh get this here note?"

The Ranger's lashing words had their effect. Addison flushed, straightened in his chair. He pointed to a long-bladed bowie knife on the desk.

"I found it here on my desk, pinned with that knife, about the middle of the afternoon, when I come back with Janet from Dan Thorp's funeral in San Jon!"

"Any idea how it got there?"

"Not the slightest! Nobody but the cook was on the place, and he swears he didn't see a soul. Somebody sneaked in and left it here, somebody who knowed I'd be away at my stepbrother's funeral." The rancher stared with vague hope at Hatfield. "You reckon somebody could be tryin' to play a joke on me?"

"It's no joke," Hatfield declared bluntly. "I've seen enough of El Gato's work to know that. Who've yuh told about this?"

"Only Janet," said Addison. "I wasn't takin' any chances, so I posted a couple of boys outside as guards till you got here. What would yuh advise?"

"Keep the guards there, for one thing," Hatfield said promptly. "We'll decide a little later about what else is to be done. It depends mostly on you."

"What do yuh mean by that?"

"Just what I said, Addison!"

HATFIELD had decided to pull no punches with the rancher. The fate of a range, the fates of men, women and children who peopled it, dangled in the balance. He tapped the piece of paper.

"In this note El Gato makes no mention of money," the Ranger added. "Had yuh noticed that?"

"Yes—yes, I'd noticed it," said Addison, "and it seemed strange. All he does is threaten me with death, or somethin' worse than death. What do yuh make of it?"

"The same thing you do. Addison"—the big Ranger leaned across the desk, his cold eyes boring implacably at the rancher—"you and me are puttin' our cards face up on the table, pronto! You know, and I know, what it is El Gato wants from yuh. The same thing he wanted from Dan Thorp!"

Addison wet dry lips. He reached a hand for the whisky bottle, then slowly drew it back.

"I don't know what yuh're talkin' about," he muttered.

"Then I'll refresh yore memory! It goes back fifteen years, Addison, to the night when you and Dan Thorp and some others crossed the Rio Grande to raid El Lobo Rojo's hideout. I savvy all about that raid, how yore band hit El Lobo's camp in the dark, killin' El Lobo and some others, and got away with a chestful of treasure. I know how yuh was followed through the mountains by *bandidos* under a *malo hombre* named Nick Dorn, cornered, and the whole band wiped out—with the exception of two, who made it across the river with the treasure. Those two, Addison, as yuh well know, were you and Dan Thorp!"

Webb Addison sat stiffly in his chair, staring wide-eyed at the Ranger, his lips twitching. He looked like a trapped animal.

"You and Thorp brought the treasure here to this valley, and hid it," Hatfield went on relentlessly. "But yuh didn't dare try to cash in on it, afraid the law would get curious, or that Nick Dorn—it was a cinch he would be tryin' to get it back—would spot it and kill yuh.

"Nick Dorn did show up, five years ago. He'd trailed the Mateo treasure to Ocotillo Valley, but he didn't know where it was hid, didn't know then who the two were who'd brought it here. It was a break for you and Thorp when Dorn was captured, his gang wiped out—or so yuh thought.

"But yuh know now, Addison, that Sheriff Starke lied about killin' Dorn, don't yuh? Yuh know that he's come back to Ocotillo Valley, masqueradin' under the name of El Gato, and that he's still after El Lobo Rojo's treasure!"

Addison's face had turned a ghastly gray. His eyes were wild with bitter desperation, he leaped to his feet.

"No!" he almost screamed. "That's a

bunch of lies! I don't know anything about any—"

He got no further. Hatfield had straightened like a spring uncoiling. A long arm shot out, steel-thewed fingers fastened themselves in Addison's shirt collar, jerked the man forward. The Ranger's open palm smacked against Addison's face, hard. The sharp blow, harmless but painful, brought the rancher to his senses. His tense body relaxed and he slumped into a chair.

The Ranger towered over him, not menacingly, for he thought that at the core Addison was honest and decent, but with features that were grim and determined. Addison was breathing heavily, and on his haggard face was a tired, beaten look.

"Yuh're right, Hatfield," he said slowly. "No use denyin' any longer that what yuh say is true. I should have told yuh sooner, when yuh first showed up. But I reckon I was just a little yellow—and scared."

Hatfield sat back down. He smiled.

"I savvy, Addison," he said. "That's the reason I slapped yuh, to bring yuh to yore senses. I'm listenin', if yuh want to spill it."

"There's mighty little to tell, beyond what yuh already know," Addison declared. "Like yuh say, Dan and me were the two, the only ones out of twenty, that got out of the mess alive. We brought the treasure back with us, worth a fortune."

"Where is it now?"

"I don't know! That's the truth, Ranger. I'd have no reason for lyin' now. I'm sick of the whole deal, and have been since I let Dan talk me into the crazy thing. There's a rough strip over on the western edge of my place—canyons, and walls that are full of caves and tunnels. When we got back, we hid the treasure in one of those caves, back in a tunnel and covered over with rocks."

"But it's not there now?"

ADDISON shook his head.

"No, and hasn't been for the last seven years. Ever since we'd brought the accursed stuff here, Dan had wanted to try to get rid of it, to turn it into cash and live high. But I knew that would be foolish, just as it had been foolish to steal it in the first place. So I refused. Then, one night about seven years ago, somethin' told me to go to the cave and have a look-see. I did—and the treasure chest was gone!

"I was shore that Dan had taken it, cached it somewheres else." The rancher paused, then went on heavily, "For, though I hate to say it, and never have to anybody else, my stepbrother wasn't what he seemed to be. Folks on this range thought he was square, generous, wantin' only enough to live on. He wasn't. Underneath, Dan Thorp was greedy, cunning, evil. Heaven knows that's bad to say, but it's true! Well, although I cared little for the treasure, when Dan denied takin' it we had a mighty bitter quarrel. Yuh say he tried to get word to me, just before he died, as to where he'd hid it?"

"I'm shore that was what he tried to say," Hatfield told the rancher. "But he died too quick. Addison, I believe yuh're tellin' the truth about not knowin' where the treasure is. But that may not save yuh. Unless I'm mistaken El Gato—or Nick Dorn—has discovered that you were the other raider, and he thinks yuh know where the loot is. This note seems to prove that. And he'll try to force the secret from yuh. Yuh're in danger every minute from here on."

The rancher nodded worriedly. "I realize that. And my girl—I wish I could talk her into goin' to her mother, but she refuses to leave me. I don't know what to do."

"The best thing would be for both of yuh to get out of the valley until this is cleared up," the Ranger said firmly.

"I won't leave," Addison declared stubbornly. "I got myself into this mess and I'll try to be man enough to see it through."

"Then keep guards posted at all times. Yuh're absolutely shore that El Gato and Nick Dorn are the same?"

Addison shook his head. "I've never seen El Gato, so I can't be shore, although I've suspected it from the first. It's the only thing that makes sense to me."

"And yuh don't know where the gang's hideout is?"

"It's generally thought that they hang out in the Devil's Playground. But I know no more about it than anybody else. Hatfield, I don't savvy what yuh can do alone. Why not wire for a whole company of Rangers?"

The Lone Wolf smiled grimly, picturing

crusty old Bill McDowell's reaction if he should do that.

"We'll try to get this rope untangled ourselves," he said.

CHAPTER X

The Devil's Playground

EARLY the next morning Hatfield saddled Goldy and headed for San Jon. He'd had a good night's sleep and was refreshed. The night had been uneventful.

The Ranger's mind was keenly alive as he rode along the trail that was bordered on both sides by waving fields of incredibly beautiful bluebonnets. The hemming mountains glistened in the early morning sunshine as if the night's mist had washed them clean.

Hatfield had a few purchases to make, and he wanted to talk again with Hannibal Haines. Then he meant to plunge with a vengeance into the business of ferreting out El Gato. The spade work had been finished, and now ahead lay swift and decisive action.

He was convinced that Addison, having made his decision, had told the truth. Therefore, if El Gato and Nick Dorn were really the same, both Addison and his daughter were in deadly danger. There was need for quick action.

If a treasure existed, the Ranger was determined to find it. But his main concern was with wiping out or capturing the bandit and his killer crew. Not until then would the dark shroud of fear be lifted from this range.

Reaching San Jon, he stabled Goldy, then went directly to Hannibal Haines' print shop. The bespectacled editor of the *Clarion* was alone, ink-stained and haggard-faced from working all night to get out his paper.

"Addison talked," Hatfield greeted the editor. "And yuh can go to the head of the class."

Haines grinned as he spread out a paper just off the press for the Ranger to read....

Sheriff Judd Starke was righteously angry as he barged unceremoniously into the *Clarion* office. His belted guns, dangling below his enormous paunch, slapped viciously against his pumping fat legs. His eyes were snapping with wrath. In one fist he clutched a crumpled newspaper.

His eyes were riveted on Hannibal Haines, seated at the old desk, and so he didn't see Jim Hatfield who sat with his chair tilted against the printing press several feet away. Wheezing heavily, the sheriff strode up to the desk and slammed down the crumpled paper. He jabbed a fat, trembling finger at Hannibal Haines.

"I warned yuh about printin' these confounded lies, Haines!" he bellowed. "I told yuh I'd jail yuh for obstructin' law and order. Now, by Jupiter, I aim to do it!"

"What lies, Sheriff?" Hannibal asked blandly.

Starke jabbed his finger at the paper. In heavy type across the top of the front page was the headline:

ANOTHER OUTRAGE BY EL GATO!

And, in smaller type:

Gallant Sheriff Breaks Own Record of Two Quarts a Day!

Underneath was the story of the torture of Sam Logan the day before, as Hatfield had related it, intermixed with a bitter, sarcastic tirade against Sheriff Starke's laxity and stupidity.

"Libelous, that's what it is!" the fat lawman raged. "I'll run you and yore lobo sheet plumb out of Texas! I'll—"

"For what, Sheriff?" Hannibal Haines spoke quietly, but there was a glint of anger in his eyes. "Prove that there's one word of untruth in that editorial and you won't have to run me out. I'll get out! You don't want the truth, Sheriff. For the truth, like a hard rain, sometimes uncovers a lot of hidden filth and muck!"

Purple veins stood out on the sheriff's fat face. He shook a huge, hair-covered fist in the editor's face.

"Yuh'll get out another paper, Haines!" he shouted. "Just as quick as yuh can slam some type together. Yuh'll take back every word in this editorial. Yuh're ruinin' my reputation. Yuh'll print a full apology, or I'll—I'll—"

"You'll what?" Hannibal demanded contemptuously. He was wholly without fear of the ranting officer. "I'll tell yuh

what you'll do, Sheriff. You'll bluster and swagger and boast and swill whisky, like you always do! You'll loaf in your office, while El Gato kills and robs and burns!"

Sheriff Starke growled an oath and, with amazing speed, snatched out one of the pearl-handled guns. He started to swing the clubbed barrel at Hannibal Haines' head.

"I wouldn't, Sheriff!"

HATFIELD'S voice was low, but carried a whiplash sting. Starke whirled, his fat-rimmed eyes flaring with surprise, and stared at the Ranger. Hatfield still sat with his chair tilted back against the printing press. His empty hands were folded in his lap, but his eyes were like chips of gray-green ice.

"Wh-what's that?" the sheriff stammered.

"I just said I wouldn't," Hatfield drawled. "Yuh might break some laws as well as a head with that gun-barrel."

"Where'd you come from?" demanded Starke.

"It's a secret." Hatfield grinned, exposing even white teeth. "Though I've been told to go to a lot of places, all tallyin' up to the same spot."

Reluctantly, Starke holstered his gun.

"Reckon I let my temper get the best of me," he admitted grudgingly. "It ain't as if this was the first time this has happened. When a man does his best, that's all he can do. Printin' a pack of lies about him won't do no good."

The sheriff swiped at his red face with a soiled bandanna, and turned to stare out a front window. A horseman had just ridden fast along the street on a sweat-drenched horse. The rider was middle-aged, wiry, dressed in overalls and leather chaps to ward off the daggerlike thorns that speared from many of the plants in that section of Texas.

"Lee Madden," Hannibal Haines murmured. "Seems in a hurry. He owns the Cross L, Lash, over to the southeast on Turkey Creek. Pretty sizable outfit."

Through a side window, Hatfield saw Lee Madden ride up and stop before the sheriff's office, dismount at the tie-bar, and enter.

"Reckon he's lookin' for me," Sheriff Starke muttered. "Hope it's not more trouble. Don't forget what I said about retractin' them statements, Haines!"

He went out, still swiping at his steaming face, and waddled along the sidewalk toward his office. Madden, who now had left the office, saw the fat lawman and stood waiting for him.

"Somethin's up," Hannibal declared. "Lee Madden's an honest rancher, and he'd have to be in trouble to have business with Judd Starke. Might be interesting."

Hatfield was already on his feet and headed for the door. He cruised along the sidewalk towards the sheriff's office, where Lee Madden and the sheriff now stood talking. Several townsmen had strolled up and stood listening, their faces tense. Madden was talking, and Hatfield caught the words, El Gato.

He quickened his pace, coming up to the small group. Sheriff Starke seemed oddly agitated as he listened to the rancher.

"But that's loco!" Hatfield heard the lawman say excitedly. "It couldn't have been El Gato. That sidewinder don't mess with cattle!"

"All I know's what happened," Madden said angrily. "When I got up yesterday mornin' I found a note tacked to a tree in my front yard. It was signed by El Gato, and it said for me to drive a hundred head of cattle to the head of Steelhead Canyon, which is on the far southwestern edge of my range, and leave 'em there. Said if I didn't do it, or if I tried any tricks, me and my whole family would be wiped out."

"And yuh done it?" Starke said, and swore bitterly. "Why didn't yuh come to me? I'd have set a trap and snared the whole crew."

"I've come to you now," Madden snapped. "I was scared, that's why, scared my wife and kids would be locked in the ranchhouse and burned up some night like Bill Jason was. So I drove a hundred steers to Steelhead Canyon and left 'em, like the sidewinder had ordered. And when the sun come up this mornin' they'd disappeared."

"Hogwash!" The sheriff was almost dancing in his excitement. "I don't believe it!"

"Yuh think I'm lyin', yuh tub of lard?" Madden demanded angrily.

"N-no, I didn't say that. It's just that he

never has been knowed to fool with cattle before. Yuh say them steers up and disappeared?"

"Yeah. Sign showed they'd been taken by mebbe a dozen riders. Trail led off toward the Devil's Playground. I got to thinkin' it over, and I got mad. I'm sendin' my folks up to El Paso, and I'm ready to fight this killin' sidewinder."

"Got to find him first," muttered the sheriff. "Yuh try to follow the sign?"

Madden shook his head. "I headed for town, figgerin' you'd want to get up a big posse."

"I'll see what I can do." Again Starke swiped at his streaming face. "Don't expect too much, though. Once that gang gets into the Devil's Playground, nobody'll ever find 'em."

JIM HATFIELD drifted away from the increasing crowd. He had seen Deputy Jeff Ryder hurrying along the plank walk. He came up to the tall young deputy, spoke to him softly, and they stepped into an alley. Briefly, the Ranger explained what had happened.

They talked in low tones for a moment, then separated. Ryder went on to where the sheriff and Madden were still talking, and Hatfield strode swiftly toward the livery stables. He quickly saddled Goldy, mounted, and rode quietly out of town.

He rode at a steady, mile-eating pace to the southeast, in the direction of Lee Madden's Cross L outfit. Jeff Ryder had given terse but explicit instructions on how to reach the head of Steelhead Canyon. For the Lone Wolf, true to the name that had been given him, had decided to make a personal investigation of this incident. His interest had been sharply aroused. Sheriff Starke had appeared startled and surprised by news of the rustled herd, which perhaps was not unnatural, for this was the first time El Gato had lowered himself to the rôle of a common rustler.

Impatience burned inside the big Ranger as he rode. Every criminal, he knew, no matter how cunning, sooner or later made the break that proved fatal. Possibly this was El Gato's.

Without trouble he found the small grassy meadow at the head of a shallow canyon where Madden had left his herd in accordance with the bandit's instructions. The trail of the stolen herd led to the southwest, where he knew lay the wild and desolate Devil's Playground. The herd had been accompanied by perhaps ten riders.

Hatfield, mounted on the golden sorrel, followed the trail. The rustlers had made no effort to conceal their spoor, which would have been impossible here on the grasslands. Farther on they would almost certainly have attempted to cover their tracks. The grass thinned, the earth became more rocky, the country increasingly rough. Before him, rising darkly and raggedly against the sky, was a jumbled mass of ridges, grotesquely-shaped walls and low peaks.

Here was the beginning of the Devil's Playground, clogging the southern end of Ocotillo Valley. It was as if the mass had been flung down and then trampled on by an infuriated giant.

The trail of the stolen herd entered the Playground by a funnel-like pass between two spiny ridges. Hatfield followed without hesitation. But now his eyes were more alert, his hands never far from the twin guns. And the going was much slower. For here the earth was almost solid rock, the job of trailing became more and more difficult, almost impossible. But there was no better tracker in all of Texas than Jim Hatfield. He clung tenaciously, losing the trail, retracing his steps to pick it up again.

After having just left the beautiful, lush grassland, the contrast was almost incredible. Here there was no timber, no vegetation except poisonous-looking vines that writhed snakelike across the faces of towering cliffs. Flinty ridges, and needle-like spires and huge walls shaped like ancient cathedrals, towered on all sides. Cliffs and huge boulders in the shapes of savage beasts about to spring, seemed to menace him. About the place there seemed something oppressive, something sinister and hostile.

The Lone Wolf forged slowly but steadily ahead on the owlhooters' trail. A dozen times he had to retrace his course and ferret out the sign. Always his eyes and ears were alert. At times a wolflike wind howled among the walls and spires, making weird, pagan music. Then it died away abruptly, leaving utter silence, with the sorrel's hoofbeats seeming thunderous. Heat flared as if from the mouth of a fur-

nace as the sunlight recoiled from the red cliffs.

Hatfield had no idea how many miles he followed the tortuous trail of the stolen cattle through the shallow canyons and weird walls of the Devil's Playground. Sometimes it required half an hour to cover a hundred yards. But it wasn't his nature to quit a task once he had embarked on it.

CHAPTER XI

In the Toils

WHEN Hatfield emerged from the rough country, it was almost mid-afternoon. He halted the sorrel, surprise running through him. It was as if he had entered another world. Before him lay the green, grass-covered floor of the valley, little different from the spot where he had entered. Angling away to the right, toward a dark belt of timber, was the trail of the rustled herd.

Quite obviously, the rustlers had entered the Devil's Playground as a blind, to lose possible trailers. They had made a circle through the roughs, and had emerged at a chosen spot. Unfamiliar with the terrain at this end of the valley, the Ranger had no idea where he was, nor how far from the point of entry.

A puzzled frown clouded the Lone Wolf's brow. Something was all wrong here. There was absolutely no doubt that the stolen cattle had been driven into the Devil's Playground, and then out again. It didn't make sense.

The sheriff's posse would be somewhere behind. Maybe they would be able to follow the trail through the roughs, maybe not. At any rate it would be a considerable time before they reached this spot. Hatfield decided to continue on the trail to its end. Then would be plenty of time to await the posse.

He spoke softly to the sorrel and rode forward. The trail led into the dense growth of pine and fir. Hatfield eyed the timber warily, knowing it was a good spot for an ambush. But there was no sound, no sign of movement, and so he rode into the cool shadows.

Here the sound of the sorrel's hoofs was muffled by a carpet of pine needles. A dark canopy met overhead, blotting out sky and sunshine. From somewhere yonder in the cool dark shadows came the silvery tinkle of water.

Hatfield grimaced, hands near gunbutts, undeceived by this peaceful scene. The trail led onward, dim in the twilight.

He heard a sharp, hissing sound, and flung himself desperately sideward in the saddle. But he knew he was too late. He felt savage pain burn his throat, and something long and sinuous and snakelike curled round and round his neck. There was a powerful jerk that almost ripped his head from his shoulders.

It tore him from the saddle and slammed him against the ground with stunning force. The shadowy world beneath the pines seemed to explode in a wild burst of colors. His brain reeling, he tried to gain his feet, to drag the black guns from leather.

But another savage jerk on the serpentine thing about his neck again drove him against the earth. He felt himself being dragged.

Hatfield knew what that strangling, serpentine thing about his neck was. It was the long, keen lash of a bullwhip.

His contact with the ground had all but stunned him, and the lash, flung with deadly accuracy and terrific force, was wound tightly about his throat, cutting off his supply of air. A purple mist was clouding his brain. His holsters, he found, were empty, the guns obviously having been jarred loose in the fall.

He clawed frantically at the lash with his fingers. But so long as the thong was taut, he knew he didn't have a chance to loosen it. Despair mingled with the bitter rage inside him. Never in his life had he been more helpless.

But now he was no longer being dragged. With that mist fogging thicker in his brain, he fought to his knees, clawing the lash from his throat. He glimpsed a huge figure driving at him in the shadows, low and fast, felt a jarring impact as the man's shoulder hit him in the chest and drove him backward to the ground again.

That charging, bull-like figure, he saw, was Ike Toombs, Turk Laval's watch-dog. Toomb's shaggy blond hair was swirling about his brutal face, and he was grin-

ning with wicked enjoyment. In one hand he still clutched the whip with which he had torn Hatfield from the saddle.

The Ranger rolled desperately, throwing up his knees, expecting the giant to jump on him with his boots. He looked straight up into the blond killer's muddy eyes that seethed with hatred and the lust to kill. He saw the thick lips curl back from doglike teeth, saw a hairy hand shift its grip on the whip, so that the loaded stock became a murderous club.

The Lone Wolf braced himself for an upward lunge.

The hand holding the clubbed whip drew back deliberately for the blow that would crush the prostrate man's skull.

"Hold it, Ike! Figger the boss'd want this jigger alive!"

THE GIANT growled with baffled anger, flung a glance over his shoulder. But slowly the hand holding the whip dropped to his side. Two other figures—cold-eyed, roughly dressed owlhoots—came from their places of concealment. They had guns in their hands. One of them stooped and picked up the Ranger's Colts from the ground where they had fallen.

Hatfield got slowly to his feet, bitterly berating himself for his laxity. For the moment he was helpless.

"Let me beat his brains out," Ike Toombs mumbled. "I said I'd kill him, for what he done in town."

"Mebbe later, Ike," one of the gunhung men, a slender, dark fellow said, and then to Hatfield, "What yuh doin' here, bucko?"

"Just out for a little ride," said Hatfield.

"Yeah!" jeered the dark man. "Well, yuh picked a bad place to ride. We saw yuh come out of the Playground. Yuh all alone?"

Hatfield shrugged. "Looks like yore pot. What's the idea?"

"Yuh'll find out, soon enough! I got to hand it to yuh, tall man, trailin' them cattle through that corner of perdition. But yuh just drove some nails into yore own coffin. Get back onto that black hoss—and yuh'd better not try any tricks!"

Goldy had gone only a few steps after Hatfield had been dragged from saddle, and now stood regarding his master in puzzlement. Hatfield took stock of his chances, decided he had none, tramped to the sorrel and climbed into saddle.

"No use waitin'," the blond giant was grumbling. "He'll die anyhow, so I might just as well finish him now."

"Shut up, Ike!" The dark killer gestured with a gun-muzzle, telling the Ranger which way to ride.

Hatfield rode slowly forward and to the right. A yellow shaft of sunlight, slanting through a rift in the dark canopy above, touched his tall, straight figure. His three captors followed closely, and a moment later they came to a cedar thicket where three saddled horses were tethered. The three swung into saddles, and they continued on through the timber.

Hatfield tried to puzzle this out as he rode along. He had trailed El Gato's crew into the Devil's Playground—or so he had thought—and now he was in the hands of Turk Laval's riders. Did this mean that Laval and El Gato were the same? That was the logical conclusion. But in that case Hannibal Haines' theories were not correct.

They emerged from the timber and onto a narrow meadow. At the far side of the meadow Hatfield could see a low, log cabin ranchhouse and smaller buildings. This, he judged immediately, was Turk Laval's Cross Bar outfit. Tall pines and giant spreading oaks hemmed the buildings, and not far distant the frowning peaks lifted abruptly against the sky. Against this wild background of mountain and shadowy forest, they rode up and stopped before the low ranchhouse.

Water had been piped through hollow logs from a nearby stream to a barrel near the bunkhouse, and several hard-faced, gun-belted punchers were gathered about this barrel. They stared curiously at the big Ranger.

"Who yuh got there, Blackie?" one of them called.

"Gent we caught snoopin' along with his nose to the ground," "Blackie," the slender gunslinger, said. "Where's Turk?"

"Inside. I'll call him." The puncher strode to the portico. "Turk," he called, "yuh got a visitor!"

Hatfield took all this in with alert, calculating eyes. He didn't yet quite understand the play, but there was no doubt that he was in a tight spot. Whether or

not Laval was El Gato, he had stolen Lee Madden's cows. He was a dangerous, violent man, and the odds were on his side. He wouldn't hesitate at putting away a man who had proof that he was a thief, if nothing worse.

The ranchhouse door opened and Laval came out. Surprise struck briefly at the arrogance on his dark features as his coldly bitter eyes riveted on Hatfield. He was bareheaded and the late sun glinted on his raven hair. He strode forward.

AT AN order from Blackie, Hatfield had swung to the ground. Toombs and the other Cross Bar rider had also dismounted.

"So we meet again, tall man," Laval said softly.

"And under different circumstances," Hatfield agreed calmly.

"Unfortunately, for you, yes. What are you doin' here?"

"Like I tried to explain to these hombres, I was just out for a little ride."

"Your kind don't ride for the fun of it!" Temper edged Laval's cold voice. "I see now just how badly I underestimated you at first. But now I've got you spotted."

"Have yuh?" Hatfield drawled. "What's yore idea?"

"Never mind! What matters is that you've seen too much, know too much."

"I wanted to kill him, back yonder," Toombs grumbled. "I'd have tromped him into the ground. But Blackie stopped me."

"Have patience, Ike," Laval said. "You'll get your bone, so stop growling." He shot at Hatfield, "Just who—and what—are you?"

"You figger it out." Hatfield fished in a shirt pocket for the makin's, feeling the hard pressure of his Ranger's badge in the small pocket on the under side of the garment. Slowly he built a quirly. "Yuh wouldn't believe me anyway."

"That's right, I wouldn't," agreed Laval. "I wouldn't believe, or trust, anybody alive. You know you're in a tough situation, don't you?"

Hatfield shrugged. "I've been in lots of 'em."

"But none like this one. You know I stole Madden's herd."

"Which means yuh're also the killin' snake who calls himself El Gato!"

Laval's black eyes narrowed wickedly. The clustered riders, perhaps fifteen of them, shifted uneasily and glanced at each other. Ike Toombs half-lifted his whip, a wordless growl in his thick throat. It was obvious that Hatfield's blunt accusation had jolted them. The Ranger had meant it that way. He had wanted to see their reaction.

"So you think I'm El Gato, eh?" Laval murmured, his eyes like black agates. "Well, maybe I am, maybe not. Too bad you won't live to find out the truth, isn't it?"

Hatfield looked slowly about the circle of men who hemmed him like a pack of ravenous wolves. He looked at Laval himself, dark, dudishly dressed, sardonic, with sooty devils capering wickedly in his eyes. He glanced at Ike Toombs, whip in hand, grizzlylike, sadistic cruelty crawling in his muddy eyes, and with clublike arms and fists. Nor did he miss the others, equally merciless and lawless, watching him.

"A matter of opinion," he said calmly. "A man's not dead until he's buried. I was careless. I won't make that mistake again."

"You won't make any mistakes again," Laval said.

"Like that, eh? Like yuh killed Bill Jason, and Dan Thorp, and tried to kill Sam Logan. Without a chance. Go ahead, Laval. What're yuh waitin' on?"

Toombs growled again, shuffled forward, doglike eagerness on his blunt, brutal features.

"Is he mine now, boss?" he whined. "Can I have 'im?"

Hatfield didn't even look at the blond giant.

"But yuh still ain't got what yuh wanted, have yuh, Laval?" he jeered. "Yuh still don't know where the treasure is."

CHAPTER XII

Fight for Life

PUZZLEMENT touched Laval's hawkish features, whether real or faked, Hatfield couldn't tell. The Cross Bar riders again looked quickly at each other. Toombs showed no emotion at all other than fixed hatred and brutal cruelty.

Tension seemed to thicken and flow like a dark, smothering substance over the clearing before the ranchhouse. The sun was low over the near peaks, splashing them with crimson and purple. The wind moaned through the surrounding trees, like weird, mocking laughter. These things Hatfield was aware of, while at the same time his wire-taut attention was focused wholly on the peril that he faced.

The wickedness and set purpose behind Laval's eyes struck at the Lone Wolf like a blow. Laval meant to see him dead, and impatience to see the task done was riding him like a hawk on a wolf's back, its talons sunk deep.

"You talk a lot, tall man," Laval purred. "I've got an idea you're trying to kill time. I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't care. All I care is that you've seen and know too much. Ike should have finished you out there in the timber. Do it now, Ike!"

With incredible quickness, the blond giant struck. The whip uncoiled, hissing, snarling, aimed straight at Hatfield's eyes with the intention of blinding him. Hatfield twisted aside. The beaded tip of the lash missed his eyes, but slashed like a hot knife blade across his cheek. Blood spurted.

Rage drummed through the Ranger. He knew the hopeless odds against him, knew that if the dull-witted giant didn't kill him, the others probably would. But he had never taken a beating lying down, and he didn't intend to do so now.

His sideward lunge had taken him to one knee, and now he whirled to his feet. The whip was coming at him again. He ducked, drove in low and hard. The slashing lash screamed over his shoulders. Toombs gave a startled yell, leaped backward, shifting his grip on the whip stock so that it became a club. He smashed it downward at the hurtling Ranger.

The blow caught Hatfield on the shoulder, numbing it. Blood from the wound in his cheek half-blinded him. But he slammed in, savagely and violenty, the point of his right shoulder striking Toombs' at the belt line.

The breath went out of Toombs in a loud *whoosh-h!* He crashed backward to the ground. The whip fell from his fingers. An ordinary man would have been knocked unconscious by that slashing shoulder blow. But the blond giant rolled, growling like a hurt dog, and clawed to his knees. His furious, muddy eyes raked the ground for his whip. But Hatfield had kicked the whip twenty feet away against the cabin wall.

Crouched there on his knees, Toombs clawed for his gun.

The gun had already cleared leather when Hatfield's boot hit it and sent it flying through the air. Snarling his rage, Toombs came to his feet and ran hard at Hatfield, clublike fists flailing.

Instead of retreating before that savage charge, the big Ranger met it head-on. He slammed at Toombs, driving him backward into one of the horses. The horse snorted, shied away, and Toombs would have fallen if Hatfield hadn't grabbed his shirt front and jerked him upright. Deliberately he slammed a fist into that pasty-white, snarling face.

A low yelp of pain rumbled from Toombs' thick throat. He rolled, came at Hatfield, trying to get his cablelike arms about the Ranger's body. He brought up a knee and slashed it at Hatfield's middle. Hatfield twisted away.

Toombs was a powerful man, not quite so tall as Hatfield, but with thicker shoulders and torso. The Ranger could see the man's corded muscles twisting and bunching through his torn shirt. He could hear the Cross Bar men jeering at the victim, yelling encouragement to their own man.

The blond giant came at him again, still with the fixed purpose of getting his antagonist within the crushing grip of his mighty arms. The Ranger stood like a rock and, when Toombs was within inches of him, he deliberately lifted his knee and speared it into the charging killer's stomach. Pain made an ugly pattern over Toombs' face, and he reeled backward.

HATFIELD leaped after him, stalking him relentlessly. With all the power of his mighty body behind them, he drove savage, chopping blows into Toombs' battered face. The giant continued to reel backward, his bootheels hammering the earth as he fought to stand against that fierce onslaught.

But Hatfield showed no mercy, knowing that he himself would be shown none if their positions were reversed. He walked

forward on the balls of his feet, mauling and hammering at the staggering giant. He drove Toombs back against the cabin wall. And there, with cold deliberation, he drove his flinty fist against Ike Toombs' chin.

The man's shaggy platinum hair played about his glazing eyes, and the whip-wielding giant slid slowly down the wall to the ground, out cold.

Hatfield turned slowly to face the Cross Bar gunhands, aware that a sinister silence had gripped the clearing. The outlaws were staring with wide, unbelieving eyes from the motionless figure on the ground to the towering Ranger. It was obvious that, heretofore, they had been accustomed to seeing all of the blond mauler's opponents crushed and hammered into insensibility by his brutish strength.

In their eyes was new respect for Hatfield. Hatfield saw this, and then saw it submerge and drown in the gathering storm of their rage and hatred. These were wild, lawless men in a wild, lawless land. They were determined to kill him.

Turk Laval's dark features were coldly furious.

"That was a good show, tall man," he said. "I almost wish you were on my side. You deserve a better death than the one you're about to die!"

He drew his gun.

His back to the ranchhouse wall, standing almost over the senseless giant he had conquered, Hatfield faced the Cross Bar wolves. The others had drawn their guns now. Their eyes were without mercy, and filled with aroused killer lust. After Laval had spoken, there was not a sound among them.

The Lone Wolf braced himself on powerful legs, ready to hurl himself forward. He didn't try to fool himself about this. He was trapped, unarmed, against hopeless odds. From the corner of his eye he saw Toombs' gun, on the ground ten feet away. His mind immediately concentrated upon that gun, seizing one wild, bitter hope for survival.

"Forget the gun," Laval sneered, as if reading his thoughts. "Or jump for it, if you like. The result would be the same. I always offer any man about to die the courtesy of a last word, tall man. You have any?"

"Only that I'd rather die from rattlesnake bite," the Ranger said, with lashing contempt. "It'd be a cleaner way to go out!"

Quick anger blazed in Laval's eyes. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"Drop the gun, Laval—quick!" a voice lashed out of the stillness. "And that goes for the rest of yuh. Pronto, yuh thievin' skunks!"

Stark surprise flicked at the faces of Laval and his gunhands. They stiffened, indecision battling with the impulse for violent action in their eyes. Facing Hatfield, they had their backs to the bunkhouse, and so didn't see what Hatfield saw —a score of men, led by Deputy Jeff Ryder, stepping out from behind the log structure with gun-filled hands.

The click from a score of gun hammers, eared back almost in unison, made up the rustlers' minds. Their guns thudded to the ground.

Hatfield retrived his own black guns and jammed them into leather. Quickly the rustlers were bound. They were a sullen, defiant lot. Ike Toombs was still unconscious, and when a bucket of water was splashed over him he stirred sluggishly and sat up, staring with muddy-eyed puzzlement at his captors.

"Yuh got here just in time," Hatfield said to Ryder. "That bunch was all set to blow me apart, and there was nothin' I could do about it."

The deputy nodded soberly. "We wasn't too far behind yuh, because the sign yuh left was pretty plain. We sneaked up through the timber, while the fight was goin' on, and got behind the bunkhouse. We saw the last part of it." He looked admiringly at the towering Ranger. "I didn't think the man lived that could beat Ike Toombs at rough-and-tumble."

Hatfield shrugged. "He's short on brains, and that counts in any kind of fight. Where's the sheriff?"

"He left us soon after we hit the badlands. Said he figgered he ought to scout on ahead and get the lay of things. We never saw him again. Yuh reckon he got lost?"

"Could be," Hatfield said.

THE RANGER turned, looking toward where Turk Laval stood with hands tied behind him. Hard-eyed possemen

ringed the Cross Bar owner. Facing Laval was a blocky, sandy-haired young fellow named Sid Peace. Hate and anger clouded Peace's eyes.

"So you're the killin' snake that calls hisself El Gato!" Sid Peace growled. "You're the polecat that nailed my uncle, Bill Jason, in his cabin and burned him. I swore I'd collect pay for that if I ever got the chance!"

The puncher slapped Laval, a hard, open-handed blow that rocked the Cross Bar man back on his heels. When Jeff Ryder started quickly forward to remonstrate, Hatfield grasped his arm.

"Wait," he whispered.

"Yuh're worse'n a crawlin' sidewinder!" the infuriated Peace spat. "Yuh ain't fit to live!"

He slapped the helpless Laval again, and again, and then hit him in the face with his fist. The blow drove Laval to the ground. He rolled over, swayed to his knees. The beginning of terror mingled with the rage in his black eyes as he looked about the circle of grim faces.

"You crazy, dumb fools!" he cried. "I'm not El Gato!"

"Like hogwash yuh ain't! I reckon yuh didn't write a note to Lee Madden, tellin' him to leave a bunch of cattle at the head of Steelhead Canyon? Then yuh didn't round up the herd, drive it through the badlands and down onto yore range, did yuh?"

"Yeah—yeah, I did that, all right," Laval said. "I signed El Gato's name to a note. I believed Madden, thinking he was up against El Gato, would be afraid to go to the law!"

"Lyin' and whinin' won't help!" Sid Peace drew back his fist to crash it again into the cowering man's face.

Hatfield leaped forward, grasped the puncher's arm.

"Easy, hombre," he drawled. "I savvy how yuh feel, but that won't help either. Whether or not he's El Gato, he's guilty of rustlin'. The law will handle it. We'll take the whole crew to town and put 'em behind bars where they belong. . . ."

The Lone Wolf was a hair-trigger sleeper. And so the three gunshots, so close-spaced that they seemed almost like one explosion, running and bellowing through the late night that shrouded San Jon, jarred him to instant wakefulness.

He sat up in bed, instantly sensing something amiss, instinctively reaching for gun-belts, boots and trousers. It had been well after dark when they reached town with the prisoners, and so Hatfield had taken a hotel room, intending to return to the Half Moon the next morning. Weary, and knowing that he would need to store energy against what lay ahead, he had retired early.

Turk Laval, having lost his suavity and given way to incessant violent outbursts of rage and abuse, had been locked in a cell by himself. Sheriff Judd Starke had showed up just as they were locking up the sullen prisoners. His vague explanation was that he had lost his way in the labyrinth of canyons and cliffs and had found his way out again only with difficulty.

The fat sheriff had announced his intention of sleeping on a cot in his office in the front part of the jail, to stand guard over the prisoners.

CHAPTER XIII

Death Has Claws

SHOTS were still echoing through the town as Hatfield jerked on his boots. He heard a man yell, high and strident, heard the hard thud of boots against the plank walk below his hotel window. Buckling on his gun-belts as he ran, he leaped along the shadowy corridor, down the stairway and out into the moonlit street.

A man came running along the street, only half-dressed. The Ranger saw that he was Jeff Ryder.

"That you, Lash?" Ryder demanded. "What's happened?"

"At the jail, looks like," Hatfield said tersely.

A light glowed in Sheriff Starke's office, and loud, excited voices came from the back part of the building. Hatfield and Ryder angled across the street at a run. They plunged into the office. The office was empty, so they went along the corridor that led back to the cell blocks.

The Cross Bar rustlers were milling excitedly. Fear showed on their faces.

"I don't mind so much havin' my light

put out when I've got a chance to fight back," one of them declared. "But I don't cotton to bein' shot like a rat in a barrel!"

Turk Laval was sprawled on the floor of his cell, his wide and sightless eyes staring at the ceiling. Sheriff Starke was kneeling beside him. As Hatfield and Ryder entered, the fat lawman looked up at them.

"Dead," he said, in a flat, emotionless voice. "Some skunk sneaked up and shot him through the window. I was asleep when it happened, but that's the way these other hombres say it was. Now, why would anybody want to do that?"

Nobody answered him. . . .

Hatfield didn't return to the Half Moon the next morning as he had intended, but instead headed toward the southern end of the valley. Three hours later he had entered the fantastic, lost world of the Devil's Playground. For here among these canyons and lava beds and cathedral-like walls, lay the final answer to the puzzle he was trying to unravel. Of that he was convinced.

That conviction had been strengthened rather than lessened by the killing of Turk Laval in his cell. Laval's death, more than anything else, had convinced the Ranger that Laval and El Gato were not the same. Laval had been a rustler, probably had committed many worse crimes, and so deserved no pity. But El Gato remained to be dealt with.

Who had killed Laval, and why? Hatfield could only guess at that. Laval had masqueraded as El Gato for one night, using the terror the bandit's name inspired to steal cattle, a crime scorned by the man himself. It was logical to assume that El Gato had wreaked quick vengeance on the pretender.

Eyes alert and wary, Hatfield penetrated deeper and deeper into the weird Playground. He knew that his task of searching for the renegades' hideout was almost hopeless, unless he received an unexpected break. But he had learned that the success or failure of almost any adventure depended on breaks. It was not his nature to wait for breaks, but to make them.

He came to a narrow, rushing stream that slashed between granite walls. Jeff Ryder had told him about this stream, the Cinnabar, that cut through the heart of the Devil's Playground and flowed into the Rio Grande at the far side. The current was wild and dangerous, and few white men had traveled its length.

Unable to cross the stream, Hatfield followed its tortuous course. The country became even rougher and wilder. Several times he saw the tracks of horses in patches of soft earth, proof that his hunch had been correct, but each time the tracks were quickly lost. He saw other proof that human beings had been here in the not distant past—cigarette butts, empty tin cans, dead campfires.

The wind made weird, whispery music among the spires and walls. Giant rattlers sunned themselves and whirred their wicked warnings as he approached. A giant eagle wheeled high in the air, glaring downward with fierce golden eyes, screaming its disapproval at his intrusion.

A huge bear shuffled from a thicket and regarded him with tiny, disinterested eyes. A band of wild pigs—peccaries—stampeded in wild confusion at his approach. Cornered, or with young, there was no more dangerous beast for its size in all Texas.

Here, Hatfield realized again, was a lost world, a primeval world where the law of claw and fang ruled. Small wonder El Gato had chosen it for his lair.

HE JERKED Goldy to a halt, hand instinctively slapping to gun-butt, as a shot crashed through the stillness. But there was no snarl of lead, and he realized instantly that the shot had not been meant for him. It had been a rifle, and it had come from a spot ahead and to his left, several hundred yards away.

Who, except members of El Gato's gang, would be in this desolate place? Taking a short-barreled carbine from its saddle-boot, the Ranger rode slowly and cautiously forward.

The shot had not been repeated. Whoever had fired the shot had probably been after game. This meant that they were unaware of his presence.

The golden sorrel stepped daintily as they proceeded slowly forward, placing each hoof carefully, as if aware of the need for caution. And the Ranger rode like a centaur, as if he were part of the magnificent animal under him. Now, Hatfield knew, he had almost reached the

spot where the gunshot had sounded. If he could capture a member of the bandit's gang, force him to reveal the location of the hideout, it would be a good day's work.

Hatfield tensed suddenly, stopping the sorrel with a pressure of his knees. Before him was an open space, rimmed on the far side by a thin line of gnarled pines. A rider had just emerged from behind a wall and was riding slowly along the edge of this pine growth.

The rider was obviously a Mexican, or a half-breed. He was blocky, brown-faced, with a bandolier of cartridges slung across his charro-jacketed body. A cone-shaped sombrero made him loom taller in the saddle than he really was. Dangling from the saddle-horn was a dead wild turkey, which explained the shot.

Then, as Hatfield was planning his course of action, he saw something else that sent an icy tingle along his spine. It was a stir of movement on the limb of a tree directly underneath which the rider was passing. A tawny, feline shape was crouched on a limb, tail twitching back and forth, steel-coiled muscles tensed for the leap down onto the man below.

It was a huge mountain lion!

Instinctively, Hatfield jerked up the carbine. Then, his eye glinting over the sights, his finger trembling on the trigger, he hestitated. Here, without doubt, was a member of El Gato's kill-mad gang. Captured, the breed might be forced to lead the way to his leader's hideout.

A shot might send him fleeing in alarm into the surrounding roughs. But, within seconds, that two-hundred pounds of tawny fury and death would hurtle down onto its unsuspecting victim. The beast was about to leap.

The Ranger's stentorian voice suddenly roared:

"Look out—above yuh! Lion!"

He saw the rider cast a wild, startled glance in his direction, then upward, heard a terrified cry emerge from his lips. The Mexican threw himself forward in the saddle, rammed long-roweled spurs into the flanks of his rangy black horse. The horse squealed, lunged forward as if shot from a catapult, even as the giant cat leaped.

Like a streak of tawny lightning the cougar shot through the air, paws outstretched, sabrelike claws unsheathed for their murderous work. The beast's snarl of fury ripped wickedly through the silence, baring fangs that glistened whitely in the sunlight.

Hatfield pressed trigger, and the rifle's bellowing echoes beat back from the walls.

The hurtling lion jerked convulsively in mid-air, but a bullet couldn't stop its forward momentum. Those unsheathed claws missed the man, but caught the black across the rump, leaving gaping red streaks of torn flesh. Still snarling, with pain and rage, the giant beast thudded against the ground, rolling over and over, slashing at the earth in its senseless frenzy.

The Mexican's terrified mount drove straight forward, still squealing, and into the timber.

Hatfield spoke softly to Goldy and the sorrel pounded forward. But not even the well-trained sorrel could entirely put aside its natural fear of all lions. Fifty feet from the threshing, snarling beast, Goldy

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stopped, reared, whinnying his protest.

"Easy, boy," the Ranger murmured. "This is plenty close."

QUICKLY he stepped from the saddle. The lion, although badly wounded was still capable of creating havoc. Spitting and snarling, its tawny eyes glaring its hate and fury at Hatfield, it tried to leap at him.

But now Hatfield saw that the beast's back was broken, its hind quarters dragging uselessly.

He put a bullet between the lion's eyes, finishing it.

Then he rembered the rider whose life he had saved. He turned to the spot where he had last seen horse and rider. There was no sign of them.

But, from back in a thicket, a voice called out:

"You saved my life, senor. I am grateful, but not stupid. Unfortunately I weel have to keel you!"

Hatfield flung himself to the ground. At the same instant a gun roared there in the thicket, and a bullet slashed the air where he had been that fraction of a second before. The Ranger rolled desperately, toward a shallow gully ten feet away. Here in the open the unseen Mexican would cut him to shreds.

Bullets followed him as he rolled, whining over the earth behind him, showering him with shale and dirt. Then he jarred against the bottom of the gully. Goldy, wise to the ways of danger and knowing that bullets had no eyes, had whirled and lunged to the shelter of a nearby nest of cliffs.

Hatfield rammed the carbine over the rim of the gully and pumped lead at the curling gunsmoke he could see in the thicket. But it was immediately plain that the Mexican had no intention of staging a gun battle.

There was a jeering laugh, a clatter of hoofs that rapidly receded.

Hatfield left the ditch, bitter anger inside him. Except for his shouted warning and shot, he might have captured the Mexican. Still, he had done the only thing possible.

It wasn't in his code to let even an outlaw die if it could be prevented.

He attempted to follow the Mexican's trail but, as he had expected, it was useless. After a while he gave it up as a bad. job. He was convinced that if El Gato's hideout was to be found, it would have to be by some method other than this hit-and-miss searching in a lost world.

Somebody who knew the way would have to lead him to it.

But that meant some member of the gang. And he knew no such member. Or did he? The big Ranger's cold eyes narrowed with thought. After a moment, he turned the sorrel and rode back the way he had come.

It was midafternoon when he reached the Half Moon. Several gun-belted, watchful-eyed punchers lounged in the vicinity, obviously on guard against treachery on El Gato's part. Janet Addison sat on the shady portico, cool and lovely in a plain gingham dress, but plainly impatient at being forced to remain near the ranchhouse.

AS HATFIELD rode up and stopped, Webb Addison had just approached a small group of punchers before the bunkhouse and was giving them instructions.

"Slim," Hatfield heard him say, "you and Smoky hit leather and get over to the Badwater hole. A stretch of the fence has got tore down, and I don't want no cows to get into that water. You know where it is, don't yuh?"

"Shore, boss," a blocky puncher said and nodded. "Over on the western part of Dan Thorp's HL."

"Yeah. Don't forget your tools. Ought to finish by night." Addison turned to the Ranger. "Been wonderin' where yuh'd got off to, Lash. Come inside and we'll have a drink. Boys, take care of his hoss."

Hatfield nodded, walked toward the ranchhouse with Addison. The rancher's face was still pale and haggard, and he was nervous.

"Dan always had to keep that waterhole fenced," Addison explained. "Some kind of mineral deposit in it that makes cattle sick, sometimes kills 'em. That's why its called Badwater Springs."

"You takin' over Thorp's outfit?" the Lone Wolf asked.

Addison shook his head. "Dan had a nephew somewheres. I'm just kind of lookin' after the spread till this nephew can be located. Least I can do."

CHAPTER XIV

Secret of the Pool

ON JANET'S red lips was a smile for the handsome Ranger as the two men crossed the portico and entered the big front room. Addison poured drinks, and he and Hatfield talked for several moments. Addison had heard of the capture of Turk Laval and his rustler crew and of Laval's death.

"Yuh think Laval was really El Gato?" Addison asked, with faint hope.

Hatfield shook his head with conviction. "I'm bettin' my chips otherwise. Laval was a rustler, mebbe a lot worse, but El Gato is still alive and kickin'. Don't get careless, Addison."

"I shore won't. I've still got the same idea about El Gato that I had two nights ago."

"Well to remember it. And it might be a good idea for you and Janet to put up in town for a few days."

"I'd thought of that. For Janet's sake, of course. If I can get her to agree, we'll ride into town tomorrow. I've got work to do here until then."

"*Bueno,*" said Jim Hatfield. "Could I borrow a fresh bronc, Addison? Mine needs a rest."

"Of course. Yuh ridin' out again, so soon?"

"Not far. Just over to the water-hole where Slim and Smoky are mendin' fence. Figgered mebbe they might need some help."

"They don't—" The rancher looked at Hatfield puzzled, then shrugged. "Mebbe they do, at that. I'll have one of the boys saddle yuh a bronc."

Five minutes later, Hatfield was astride a long-legged dun and riding at a gallop to the southwest. Addison had given him explicit directions on how to find Badwater Springs. Impatience was hot inside him, as was always the case when he considered himself on the verge of an important discovery.

The instant Addison had mentioned Badwater Springs, a brilliant light had seemed to flash inside the Lone Wolf's brain. His mind had leaped backward several days, to a scene beside a deadly soaphole, and he seemed to hear again the words of a dying man: "Done a—bad thing—want to straighten it out. Tell Webb—loot hid—" And then, "Bad—water—"

At the time the Ranger had attached no significance to those two final words gasped out by Dan Thorp. He had thought that the conscience-stricken rancher was begging for water. But back there at the ranchhouse had come, full-blown, the conviction that Thorp had been trying to say the loot was hidden in, or near, the Badwater water-hole.

Maybe, Hatfield thought, the idea was crazy. But now, as always, he was riding his hunch.

Badwater Springs was a sizable trickle of water that seeped from the living rock near the base of a red-rock cliff. The water, although icy cold, had a peculiar grayish, cloudy color. At the base of the cliff had been formed a deep pool, or pothole, perhaps thirty feet in width, filled with the cloudy water. Two sides of the pool were rimmed with overhanging rock ledges.

"Slim" Johnson and Smoky, both good-natured, likable punchers, were already busy mending the barbwire fence that had been thrown about the water. Although at first puzzled by the big Ranger's willingness to pitch in and help them, they had instantly taken a liking to him, and welcomed his company.

"I'm dry as gunpowder," Hatfield said after a while. "Yuh reckon that water's fit to drink?"

The two punchers laughed.

"It shore as heck ain't, mister," Slim said. "Swallow it and yuh'll throw up you're boots and socks!"

"Anyway, I aim to wash my hands and face," the Ranger declared.

He descended into the little sink that held the pool, skirting the water until he stood on one of the rock ledges. The cloudy water came to within a few inches of the rim of the ledge. Hatfield stooped, dipped his hands into the cold water, splashed the liquid over his dusty face. And while doing this he studied the pool with minute detail.

He tried to imagine himself in Dan Thorp's place. If he were Thorp, with Thorp's cunning brain, where would he cache a treasure chest? He had his an-

swer almost instantly: In the depths of the pool, back under one of the overhanging ledges.

FORCING himself to appear leisurely, so as not to attract the attention of the two punchers, he inched along the ledge. His arm dangled over the ledge, thrust as far as he could reach down into the cold water.

His hand encountered what was obviously a hardwood picket pin, such as was used to picket horses, driven into a crevice in the rock ledge several inches below the water line and invisible from above. Exploring with his fingers, Hatfield discovered that a chain was fastened to the pin. The chain was taut, and extended downward into the pool. He tried to pierce the cloudy water with his eyes, but could see no more than a few inches.

Quick triumph rioted through the Ranger. The chain extended at an angle, back underneath the overhanging ledge. He tugged at it and found that its lower end was fastened to some heavy object.

"What yuh doin' down there, cowboy?" Slim's bantering voice came to him. "Takin' a bath with yore clothes on?"

Hatfield straightened, grinning back at the cowboys. "Nope, but a bath wouldn't be a bad idea, at that. This water tastes bad, but it's powerful cold."

He climbed out of the shallow sink and fell to again at the fence-mending job. The sun was still half an hour above the Chisos when the task was finished. It was just touching their ragged crests when they reached the Half Moon.

The Ranger talked again with Addison, but made no mention of the almost certain fact that he had located the loot of El Lobo Rojo. He ate supper with the punchers, joining in their horse-play. For the Lone Wolf, who once had attended an engineering school, would have been equally at home among a gathering of college professors or a gang of roistering cowhands.

When it was finally dark, and a round yellow moon was soaring above the eastern mountains, lining the turrets against the night sky like skeleton fingers, Hatfield announced his intention of riding into town. He saddled Goldy, mounted and rode away from the ranch. But, once out of sight, he doubled back sharply to the right and headed toward Badwater Springs. He had to be sure what—if anything—was in that waterhole before he took his next step.

Reaching Badwater Springs half an hour later, he wasted no time. Stripping, he stood poised a moment on the rock ledge, a bronzed, godlike figure in the flooding moonlight. Then his powerful body cleft the water in a graceful dive, and he plunged downward into the cloudy, cold depths. He kept his mouth tightly closed as he bored downward through the poisonous water. He could see nothing, but his groping hands found the chain that extended downward from the stake driven into the ledge. He pulled himself along the chain, and seconds later bumped into a bulky, solid object.

It was, he realized with a thrill of exultation, some kind of box or chest. The chain was fastened to a ring attached to the chest. Hatfield slid his fingers under it, tugged, and found that he could lift it with comparative ease in the water.

His lungs almost bursting for want of air, the Ranger fought back to the surface and climbed onto the ledge. He found the stake, caught hold of the chain, braced himself and tugged. The weight on the pool's bottom, back under the ledge, lifted slowly through the grayish water. It broke the surface, like some dark monster from the depths, bobbing and churning the water.

Hatfield drew the thing in until it touched the ledge. He stooped, grasped the ring to which the chain was attached. His steel-like muscles coiled and bunched and rippled, as he slowly dragged the heavy, moss-covered object onto the ledge.

It was, he saw then, in reality a chest—a chest made of heavy oak, reenforced by iron bands. The padlock had been broken, and the lid was held shut simply by a steel pin being thrust through a staple. Almost with awe, Hatfield removed the pin, lifted the water-soaked lid.

He caught his breath sharply, as the moonlight poured in a golden flood down into the chest.

Glittering in the cascade of moonlight was the stolen treasure which had brought terror and chaos to an entire rangeland, for which men had been tortured and killed. There were bars of gold and silver, gold and silver coins, precious stones, bap-

tismal fonts, golden incensories and silver chalices from looted missions, all dumped haphazardly into the chest.

HATFIELD stared at the gleaming array of wealth, not impressed by its value, but angry because of the suffering it had caused. Angry with the men who had brought it here, and brought trouble with it. He determined that its curse should be quickly erased from Ocotillo Valley, and that could be accomplished only by the death, or capture, of the man who called himself El Gato.

He closed the chest lid. Grasping one end of the chest his muscles rippled and coiled as he slowly shoved the thing back into the pool. It slid into the grayish water with hardly a splash, then sank slowly down into the cold depths from which Hatfield had drawn it moments before, leaving absolutely no sign of its presence.

The treasure had reposed in its watery grave for several years, ever since Dan Thorp had stolen it from its original hiding place in the cave, and so a few more hours would make no difference. For months El Gato had conducted his relentless search, without success, and Hatfield considered it unlikely that the treasure would be found during these next few hours.

He donned his clothes, remounted, and rode away from Badwater Springs. But instead of riding back to the Half Moon, he headed for San Jon, reaching there some two hours later.

The early night activity was in full swing as he rode along the street. Murky lamplight speared from doorways and windows and made delicate patterns in the street's dust. Loud, ribald noises hammered out of saloons. A six-mule freight wagon crawled along the street, northward bound. A cowboy raced his horse out of the moonlight and into town, his high, thin yell reaching out.

A tall, quiet figure stood in front of the sheriff's office, his back to the wall, the red glow of a cigarette between his lips, and watched these things. It was, Hatfield saw, Jeff Ryder. Through a window, inside the lighted office, he could see the gross figure of Sheriff Judd Starke.

Hatfield didn't pause, but called out: "Down at the *Clarion* office, Jeff. I'd like to palaver with yuh."

Ryder made no answer, but his cigarette made a red arc into the street and, looking back, the Ranger saw him stir and push away from the wall.

Lights glowed inside Hannibal Haines' print shop. The Lone Wolf dismounted, tramped inside. The skinny, bespectacled editor, busy at his old desk, looked up quickly. His grin was quick and friendly.

"Howdy, tall man," he said. "Any news that's fit to print?"

"News, but not fit to print—yet," Hatfield declared, and sprawled in a chair. "But I think I can promise yuh a real story in a little while."

"I hope so. I could use some news—good news. Have you found out something?"

"A little while ago," the Ranger said slowly, "when I was ridin' through a thicket, I felt a sharp pain in my leg. Yuh reckon it was snake-bite?"

Hannibal took the hint, produced a bottle from a desk drawer. They drank, and just then there was a light step in the doorway and Deputy Jeff Ryder stepped inside. He accepted the bottle, then dropped into a chair and waited for Hatfield to speak.

First, Hatfield took from the inside shirt pocket the badge he kept there—a silver star set against a silver shield—and held it cupped in his palm so the deputy could see it. Ryder started, an exclamation burst from his lips.

"A Texas Ranger!"

Hatfield nodded, and Hannibal Haines said with pride, "Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf. You've heard of him?"

"I'll say I have." Ryder stared almost with awe at the tall Ranger. "Yuh didn't have me fooled too much, tall man. I had yuh tallied for somethin' besides a saddle bum. Why're yuh here?"

"El Gato," Hatfield said grimly. "And I don't think it will be long now till we nail his hide to the barn door. Hannibal, tell him about yore theory concernin' who El Gato really is."

Next Month: JIM HATFIELD in THE VANISHING VAQUEROS

CHAPTER XV

Lair of the Cat

FOR THE next several minutes the editor spoke quietly, retelling, as he had told it to Hatfield, the story of the Texans' foray into Mexico after El Lobo Rojo's treasure. He told of the part played by Dan Thorp and Webb Addison in that raid, and his belief that El Gato was in reality the Mexican bandit chieftain's American lieutenant, Nick Dorn.

"It's more than a theory," Hatfield declared quietly, when the editor had finished. "I've found the treasure!"

"The dickens yuh have!" Ryder exploded. "Then yuh're rich!"

Hatfield shook his head. "The treasure's not mine, any more than it belonged to Dan Thorp and Addison. It'll go back to Mexico, where it belongs, and to its rightful owners if they can be found. And findin' the loot ain't the main thing. El Gato and his outlaw gang must be wiped out!"

"Yuh've got to find 'em first," Ryder said soberly, "and that's kind of like lookin' for one certain grain of sand in a desert."

"Mebbe we can find a way," the Lone Wolf said quietly.

He lowered his voice and talked for several minutes, after which he and Jeff Ryder left the *Clarion* office. Hannibal Haines continued with the business of getting his paper ready for the press.

After leaving the print shop Hatfield and Jeff Ryder crossed to a saloon, where they had a drink. Then they parted, Ryder announcing his intention of going to his hotel room, Hatfield entering a restaurant.

Only five minutes later, while he was still eating, the flat, vicious report of a gunshot rang through the town. Hatfield got quickly up and went outside, a premonition of evil sharp and urgent inside him. . . .

It was almost noon of that same day when Sheriff Judd Starke entered the Devil's Playground. He wound his way without hesitation among the walls and through the canyons, like a man who had traversed this route many times before, as indeed he had. He skirted vast chasms, where a misstep on the part of his horse would have sent them both hurtling downward to certain death, threaded his way without hesitation through wind-carved cliffs, the sides of which were covered with weird pictographs left by some ancient race as crude records of their existence.

He came to the swift-flowing Cinnabar and followed its winding course for several miles, reaching finally a spot where the stream narrowed abruptly and plunged between sheer rock walls. Here it formed a pass perhaps a hunderd yards in length. Inside the pass, narrow rock ledges extended along each side of the stream.

Sheriff Starke continued along one of the ledges.

The stream rushed through this narrow opening with a booming sound, and a grayish mist fogged up from the leaping water, stirred and churned by the strong wind that was drawn through the funnel-like passage. Although the sun was almost overhead, its rays did not penetrate here, and the passage was like a weird, misty world that trembled with the roll of giant drums beating back from the dripping walls.

The pass widened, and Starke emerged abruptly into a long, diamond-shaped, cliff-hemmed valley. The floor of this small, hidden valley was covered with boulders, underbrush and gnarled trees. The earth was shaly and flintlike. Beyond the sheer walls that hemmed the place the peaks of the Chisos reared dark and hostile.

Sheriff Starke rode along the valley, making no effort at secrecy, and before long approached several log cabins that huddled in the shadows of the walls at one side of the miniature valley. Perhaps a score of gun-belted, cold-eyed men were in sight in the open space about these cabins, talking, indulging in horse-play. Gaunt-flanked horses were in pole corrals beside the stream that flowed nearby.

The men showed no alarm, and only slight interest, at the approach of the fat sheriff. Nor did Starke pay them more than scant attention as he rode on past them and approached the base of the ragged rock wall that towered upward from the valley floor. There he stopped

and dismounted, tying his horse to a sapling.

Nearby, hewn out of the living rock, were a series of rude steps that led upward from the base of the wall to a ledge twenty feet above. Although the crude steps had obviously been hewn by human hands, they showed signs of age.

Rain and wind and time had laced the stone with crevices and pot-holes. The face of the cliff on each side of the rude stairway was covered with grotesque drawings — of humans, animals and strangely-shaped objects, etched with the red cinnabar ore that abounded in this region.

STARKE mounted the steps, puffing and grumbling, and found himself on a wide ledge that was roofed by an overhang of the cliff. Before him was an opening in the cliff, shaped like a doorway and almost as large. The opening, like the steps, showed signs of having been smoothed and shaped by human hands.

Starke stepped through the opening into a high, wide tunnel. The place was dry, but had an ancient, musty smell. It extended backward into the earth until it was swallowed by the darkness.

Beside the doorway lay a pile of pine slivers that had been soaked for days in kerosene. Starke applied a match to one of the slivers and it flared up instantly, throwing a garish yellow light over the walls. He went along the tunnel, his footsteps echoing hollowly on the smooth tunnel floor that gave evidence of having been trod by countless other feet, perhaps centuries ago. The fat lawman shivered, seeming to feel the presence of these ancient ones who had dwelt here, their hostility, the hatred in their eyes as they glared from the shadows pressing about him.

He turned a corner, the tunnel narrowed, and before him he saw a dim glow of light. The light shone through a silken curtain that was stretched across the narrow passage. Just this side of the curtain, branching off from the main tunnel, was another, smaller tunnel.

From the shadows of this secondary tunnel, as Starke approached the curtain, suddenly stepped a towering, queerly-dressed figure and blocked his path. It was a giant Oriental—a big jawed, slant-eyed man with a dangling yellow mustache, and dressed in loosely flowing robes of blue and crimson silk. In the sash about his enormous waist was a short, wicked-looking sword with a wavy blade. About the giant there was something incredibly evil.

Apparently the Oriental recognized Starke, for he stepped aside without speaking, regarding the sheriff with rock-like eyes.

"Yuh give me the creeps, Tso Hung," Starke grumbled. "Humped there in the dark like a spider ready to jump. Nick busy?"

Tso Hung gestured toward the curtain, retreated into the shadows again.

Starke pulled aside the curtain, and stepped into a large, dry, well-lighted cave. The walls and floor of the cave had been shored with roughly-hewn planks. Several lamps bracketed to the timbers gave ample light.

The place was lavishly furnished. Rich Oriental rugs carpeted the floor. Shelves of books lined the irregular walls. In the center of the room was a stout black table that was littered with other leather-bound books, back-dated newspapers and medical journals. At one side of the room was a white-enameled table, and beyond it were surgical instruments neatly arranged in glass cases.

This might have been the study of some famous surgeon in a great city, instead of an ancient cavern in the desolate Chisos.

"Well, Starke, what is it?" a cold, resonant voice demanded.

The sheriff jumped, jerking his gaze back to the black table. A man sat there in a deep leather chair, smoking a cigar. The man was tall, powerful, with raven black hair and eyes. His thin, high-cheeked features might have been carved from gray alabaster. His fingers, thumbing through a book, were long, slender, powerful. His shrewd black eyes seemed to glow with a bleak inward fire, and they held open contempt as they looked at the fat sheriff.

"Well, Starke," Nick Dorn asked again, impatiently, "what brings you here?"

"I needed to talk to yuh," the lawman muttered. "Things are gettin' pretty hot out there."

"You don't have to tell me that. I know what goes on in the valley, as well and al-

most as quickly as you do. It will soon be over, then you will be rid of me, and I of you. I assure you that I've enjoyed our association even less than you have."

JUDD STARKE dropped into a chair, took a bottle from his pocket, upended it and drank noisily.

"Yuh found out where the loot is?" he asked eagerly.

"Not yet, but I will,"

"Yuh've been sayin' that a long time," Starke grumbled. "I've taken a lot of risks, coverin' up for you, pretendin' I don't savvy who El Gato is nor what he's after. Folks are beginnin' to talk. They're gettin' suspicious."

"Let them!" said Nick Dorn. "It will soon be over, I tell you, and the stupid fools in this valley will never know what it was all about. They think that all El Gato wants is the paltry sums he extorts from them. Admittedly, those sums have helped. They have made it possible for me to keep going while I sought the greater reward. They enabled me to buy supplies, to keep my men in enough money to buy tobacco and whisky, and"—his bitter black eyes seared the turncoat lawman with their contempt—"to buy the loyalty of such as you."

"I've had precious little from you," Starke growled, flushing. "Just enough for necessary expenses, and to buy a few votes last election. I let yuh escape that time for just one reason—because yuh promised me a fourth of that bandit loot when yuh found it. Yuh said it wouldn't take long. Sometimes I wonder if yuh'd—"

The sheriff paused, his pale eyes darting a glance at Dorn. The man who called himself El Gato leaned forward, smiling coldly, his slender fingers toying with a razor-sharp scalpel.

"You wonder what, my friend? Whether I've found the loot and am keeping it from you? No. Perhaps you, who have no more conscience than a blind rattlesnake, will find it hard to believe, but I have my own code of ethics. Just as you will find it hard to believe that, not so many years ago, I graduated from a famous medical school. I was assigned to a well-known clinic in a great Eastern city. Before me was a brilliant future, fame, wealth, respect. But the black evil that was born inside me was my downfall. It drove me into paths that were illegal and wicked. I was apprehended, and fled before the wrath of the law."

"I wondered about the way yuh'd fixed up this cave," Starke muttered.

Nick Dorn, alias El Gato, smiled bitterly.

"I have found it hard to forget what might have been. I have, in a way, lived with a dream—a dream that could not be wholly submerged by the wickedness that drives me relentlessly. I, who was trained to save life, actually enjoy killing and inflicting pain. Take the case of the rancher, Sam Logan, a few days ago. I didn't hate him, and he had no money. Yet I had him tortured in a most hideous fashion."

"It was a devilish thing to do," Starke said hoarsely. "Tyin' a man up next to a rattler, so that the critter's fangs just barely missed each time it struck."

Dorn's chuckle sent an icy shiver along the sheriff's spine.

"It would have been something to watch! But I was there, in spirit. I enjoyed it. And then, too, it served to warn those who might have an impulse to defy me in the future."

"Why'd yuh have Turk Laval killed?" demanded the sheriff. "It kind of put me in a bad spot."

Dorn frowned. "Because he was stupid enough to use my name for his own profit. Didn't I say I had my own code of ethics? I have tortured and killed and used extortion, yes, to get money. I needed that money, because I was playing for rich stakes. Those sums wouldn't have been sufficient to buy your loyalty, nor the loyalty of my followers. They have stayed with me, obeyed my orders, because I promised them a share of El Lobo's loot when it is found. I will keep that promise. I take care of those who are loyal to me and do my bidding. I punish those who are treacherous or those who bungle. Such as the two who killed Dan Thorp. That was not according to the orders I had given."

"What happened to 'em?" asked Starke.

The man known as El Gato shrugged. "They are no longer with us. Thorp was one of the two men alive who could have revealed where the treasure is hidden. Instead of Thorp, they should have killed the tall man who pulled him from the quicksand."

Starke swigged noisily from the bottle again.

"That's one of the things I craved to talk to yuh about—this big hellion who calls himself Jim Lash and claims to be a drifter. He's stirred up a lot of trouble. He's tough, dangerous, and I don't like the way he acts. I don't believe he's—"

"What he pretends to be?" The bandit leader smiled sardonically, his inky eyes narrowing coldly. "You're right, he is not. His name is Jim Hatfield, and he's a Texas Ranger. But don't worry about it, Sheriff. He, too, will soon be among the missing!"

CHAPTER XVI

El Gato Strikes

BOTH surprise and resentment showed in Sheriff Starke's whisky-reddened eyes.

"A Texas Ranger!" he exclaimed. "That shore does put me in a tight spot! Yuh knew this all along, and didn't tell me?"

"I discovered it less than an hour ago," Nick Dorn told him coolly. "One of my men, Pablo Salazar, told me. Pablo had been out in search of game. He was about to be attacked by a mountain lion when this Ranger, obviously in search of this place, shot the lion and saved Pablo's life. Pablo, ungrateful wretch that he is, tried to kill Hatfield, but failed. It so happens that Pablo was a member of a smuggling ring up close to El Paso, several years ago, which this Jim Hatfield smashed. So he recognized his rescuer for who and what he is."

"I don't like it," Starke said nervously. "He's got to be got rid of."

"He will be," Dorn promised confidently. "Is that all you wanted to talk about?"

"Another gent's stirrin' up a considerable mess," the treacherous lawman growled. "I've mentioned him before—Hannibal Haines, editor of the town's newspaper,"

"So you have. What is it now?"

"The stuff he prints in his lowdown paper. It's been worse than ever lately. He's tryin' to stir the valley up against you. And he's turnin' folks against me. He's printed a lot of things about me that I don't like."

"Too near the truth, eh?" The dark-faced man laughed sardonically. "My fat, drunken friend, he couldn't say anything bad enough about you. You're greedy, evil and treacherous. You would sell your soul—and have—for a drink of whisky or the hope for riches. But this Hannibal Haines. I've been intending to get around to him. Time is getting short, so I will assign this chore to you."

Starke stared. "Me? Yuh mean—"

"Exactly. It is you he has harmed most. So you have the pleasant task of getting rid of him."

"But I'm a sheriff!"

"You're a drunken fool!" El Gato snapped. "And you'll do as you're told. Won't you?"

"It's liable to get me in mighty bad," Starke muttered, but his whining tone was acceptance of the order. "I—I want to get this business finished. Yuh said there was two men who knew where the treasure was hid. Who is the other man?"

"Webb Addison! That will be taken care of, also, and quickly. My men already have orders to bring him here."

"I don't know." Starke shook his head. "Addison may be stubborn."

"Not when his beautiful daughter is involved!" the bandit said. . . .

As Jim Hatfield stood on the sidewalk, after the shot had pulled him from the restaurant, his alert eyes probed along the shadowy street in an effort to locate the source of the disturbance.

A ripple of excitement was running through the town. Jeff Ryder left the hotel and came at a swift pace toward the Ranger. Sheriff Starke ran from his office, and even at this distance Hatfield could hear his loud, uneven breathing.

A puncher appeared in the doorway of the *Clarion* office.

"Get a sawbones, somebody!" he yelled. "Hannibal Haines has been shot!"

Ryder had come up, and now he and Hatfield raced across the street and into the print shop. Hannibal Haines sat with head and the upper portion of his body slumped across the desk, blood staining the litter of papers beneath him.

Hatfield knew, even before he made his examination, that the newspaper editor was dead.

"Dead?" Jeff Ryder asked tersely.

Hatfield nodded, his gray-green eyes, bleak and stormy..

"Shot through the back of his head. Bullet came out over his left eye." He looked at the lanky puncher who had shouted the news from the doorway. "What do you know about this?"

"Nothin'," denied the pale-faced rider. "I was passin' out front, and happened I was lookin' through the window at Hannibal there at his desk. I heard a shot, and saw Hannibal sort of jump and then fall across the desk. I come inside, saw he was hurt, then started yellin'."

"Yuh didn't see who fired the shot, or where it came from" asked Hatfield.

"Didn't see anybody. Shot sounded like it was out back somewheres, though."

The sheriff came barging into the office, trailed by several townsmen. His gun was in hand.

"Make way here!" he ordered. "What is it—what's happened?"

"Haines has been killed," Jeff Ryder said quietly.

THE FAT sheriff put on a fine exhibition of outraged anger. He fired truculent questions right and left.

Hatfield paid the fuming lawman scant attention. He was quietly making his own observations, drawing his own conclusions. Before Doc Corn arrived, gave his coroner's verdict, and the body was taken across the street to the funeral parlor, the Lone Wolf had finished his examination.

The bullet, from a .44 caliber six-shooter, had been fired through a rear window, which was open. It had been fired from a considerable distance. Judging from the angle, Hatfield was able to ascertain almost the exact spot from which it had been fired.

Seething with inward rage over the cold-blooded murder of a man he had counted his friend, the Ranger quietly slipped away from the excited crowd. He went through a dark alley between the print shop and another building that housed a general merchandise business owned—according to a sign across the front—by Mullins and Conn.

Hatfield paused at the rear end of the alley. Before him was a back street, narrow and rutted, used principally for hitching purposes and for wagons and buckboards. Almost directly across the narrow street was a low frame structure.

The Ranger crossed and paused at one corner of this building, which placed him in the mouth of another narrow alley between this structure and another one a few feet away. It was dark here, and deserted, for few people frequented this back street after nightfall.

From this spot Hatfield could look through the open rear window of the print shop. He had a perfect view of the desk and the chair in which Hannibal Haines had been sitting when he was killed.

The earth under his feet felt soft and damp, and when the Ranger lit a match he saw that water had leaked from a watering trough a few feet away and soaked the ground. Plain in the soft earth, close up against the wall, were the boot prints of the man who had stood here to fire the shot that killed Haines.

Feeling something soft and sticky on his fingers, Hatfield examined them and saw a crimson stain. At first he thought it was Hannibal Haines' life blood. Then he remembered that he had been standing with his head braced against the wall of the building. He scratched another match.

He spelled out the lettering on the wall:

MULLINS & CONN

From this he judged that the shack served as a store warehouse. Obviously the sign had been painted only that afternoon, for the red paint was still damp.

Grim-eyed, the tall Ranger returned to the front street. He talked privately with Deputy Jeff Ryder and, some time later, both went to their hotel rooms, knowing that before many hours the showdown would come. . . .

The sun was well above the mountains when Hatfield awoke the next morning and dressed leisurely. Impatience was sharp inside him, but he knew that what lay ahead could not be rushed. After dressing, he went along the hotel corridor and tapped on the door of Jeff Ryder's room.

"Come in," a sleepy voice said. Hatfield found the tall, good-looking deputy still in bed.

The Lone Wolf grinned. "Time to rise and howl," he said.

And, always ready for horse-play no matter how serious the course of events,

he grabbed the deputy, wadded him in the covers and dumped him to the floor. There was a sharp, good-natured scuffle, and Hatfield found the brawny young fellow a worthy antagonist.

After Ryder had dressed, they went downstairs. The air was cool and tangy, with streamers of mist shrouding the higher peaks of the Chisos. The town was still and quiet. The door to the sheriff's office was closed. Starke, Ryder said, was a late riser.

They entered a restaurant and ordered a substantial breakfast. Afterwards, they lit cigars and sat there talking in low tones, waiting.

It was almost on hour later when the door to the sheriff's office opened and Starke appeared. He stood there in the doorway, peering along the street, dishevveled and puffy-eyed. His guns, however, were strapped below his bulging paunch.

HATFIELD and Ryder got up and left the restaurant. They started angling across the street toward the sheriff's office.

But just then there was a swift, hard thud of hoofs as a rider on a sweat-drenched horse entered the upper end of the street and raced along it. The rider was blocky, sandy-haired, and blood was running over one side of his freckled face.

"That's Smoky Shane," Ryder exclaimed. "Somethin' must have happened out at the Half Moon!"

Smoky Shane raced up to the sheriff's office and dragged his reeling mount to a halt. The sheriff shuffled out. Hatfield and Ryder went quickly forward, sensing disaster.

"What is it, hombre?" the sheriff demanded heavily. "What's happened to yuh?"

The puncher swore bitterly as he swung to the ground.

"Never mind me! El Gato's hellions have got Webb Addison and Janet!"

Jeff Ryder seized the puncher's shoulder and shook him roughly.

"What's that?" he shouted. "Don't lie about this, Smoky, or I'll tear yuh apart!"

"Take it easy, Jeff," Hatfield advised gently. "Go ahead, Smoky. Tell us what happened."

The blocky rider's words almost tumbled over each other.

"Soon after sunup, Addison told me and Slim Johnson to hook a team to the buckboards. Said him and Janet aimed to come into town, and I reckon they aimed to stay a while judgin' from the clothes and other stuff they had packed.

"Addison told me and Slim to come along—to act as guards, I reckon—and we did. Nothin' happened till we got nearly to Reelfoot Creek, where the trail dips between them cliffs, when a bunch of tough-lookin' hombres rode out of a break in the walls."

"How yuh know they belonged to El Gato's gang?" Sheriff Starke demanded. "I figger Turk Laval was El Gato."

"Because," said Smoky, "when these hellions rode out with guns in their hands, I heard one of them say, 'Pull up, Addison. You and the girl are comin' with us. El Gato craves to see yuh!' Me and Slim grabbed for our guns, but they had us cold and there wasn't much we could do. Half a dozen bullets knocked Slim from the saddle. Reason I got away with just this bullet gash across the face was because I was ridin' about fifty feet back. I knowed it wouldn't help Addison and the girl any to get killed, so I made it into some timber and headed for town."

A small crowd had gathered as Smoky Shane told his story. At first men swore with outraged fury, then turned quiet and sultry. In the West there was no greater crime than the molestation of a woman. The bandit known as El Gato had stepped across the deadline, and now there could be no rest until vengeance was exacted.

Sheriff Starke was striding back and forth, his mustache twitching, pounding a hairy fist into his palm.

"An outrage against law and dignity!" he declared dramatically. "A slur cast upon Texas womanhood. But I promise yuh it won't go unavenged. That sidewinder will be drawn and quartered and left for the vultures to poison theirselves on! Guns and saddle, you buskies, and round up a dozen or two more! We're takin' El Gato's trail!"

Jeff Ryder started toward his superior, but Hatfield caught his arm.

"Let it ride," he whispered. "A posse is what we need. See that the right kind of men are picked."

Ryder nodded reluctantly. It was plain that Janet Addison's peril had placed him under a terrific strain. Jim Hatfield strode

quickly toward the livery, where he saddled the golden sorrel.

CHAPTER XVII

A Ranger Rides

NO MORE than twenty minutes later, a cavalcade of two-score grim-faced, gun-belted men thundered out of San Jon. A plume of yellow dust rose behind them as they took the west trail toward the Half Moon.

Sheriff Starke rode at their head, urging them on with voice and gesture, an imposing figure of outraged justice. Close behind the sheriff rode Jim Hatfield on his golden sorrel, flanked by Jeff Ryder on a rangy steeldust. The others were strung out along the trail, ordinary Texas range men who rode with the easy grace and expertness of centaurs.

Smoky Shane, on a fresh horse, and scorning his wound, was with the posse. As they roared across Reelfoot Creek, the blocky pucher called out:

"Just ahead's where the hellions rode out from that break in the wall!"

The buckboard, empty except for two suitcases, stood on the creek bank where the team of bays had pulled it in search of water. A front wheel was jammed between two boulders. A hundred feet farther on a still figure lay sprawled grotesquely in the dust of the trail. Smoky Shane jumped from saddle, ran and stooped over the figure.

When he straightened and looked up at Hatfield beside him, unashamed tears of grief and rage were running over his freckled, dusty cheeks. Slim Johnson, Smoky's saddlemate, was dead.

The Lone Wolf placed his hand on the waddy's shoulder.

"We'll collect for it, son," he said gently.

Hatfield's eyes quickly and expertly read the story told by the sign on the trail. Addison and his daughter had been taken from the buckboard and placed on horses, which obviously the outlaws had brought for that purpose. The trail angled southward, toward the Devil's Playground.

"Once they get in there we won't have much chance of findin' 'em," Sheriff Starke declared. "But we ain't turnin' back. We'll smoke that den of sidewinders out if it takes from now on! Let's pound leather, men!"

Hatfield said nothing, but followed Starke's lead as the big badgetoter led the cavalcade at breakneck speed across the slightly undulating valley floor toward its lower end. There was no hope of overtaking the renegades, he knew. Long before this they would be deep into the badlands. But he knew, nevertheless, that there was need for haste.

The man who called himself El Gato was utterly merciless. The bandit believed that Webb Addison knew the secret of the treasure, and to gain that secret—which Addison would be powerless to reveal—nothing would be too brutal for him to do. It was equally certain that the ruthless bandit leader intended to use Janet Addison as a lever to force the information from her father.

The posse thundered on. They crashed recklessly through dense belts of timber. They drove through thickets of yucca, Spanish dagger and cactuses, scorning to turn aside from the needlelike thorns that slashed at them. They splashed through creeks, and plunged into and out of ravines. Then the spiny ridges and towering walls of the Devil's Playground loomed abruptly before them.

The owlhooters' trail plunged straight into the badlands. The posse followed. But they had penetrated the *malpais* only a few hundred yards when the trail abruptly vanished into a stretch of lava beds.

Hatfield watched, making no effort to help, as futile efforts were made to ferret out the lost trail. He knew that he probably could have found the trail, although it no doubt would have been lost again and again deeper in the roughs. But the slow task of trailing the killer gang was not a part of his plans.

Sheriff Starke fumed and ranted.

"You buskies wait here," he finally said. "I'll take a long scout out through the badlands and see if I can pick up the sign."

He started to rein his horse away.

"Just a minute, Sheriff," Jim Hatfield said quietly. "I don't like yore idea. I think yuh'd better stay here!"

The sheriff whirled his horse to face the Ranger, instantly on guard.

"What yuh mean, tall man?" he snapped. "I don't like yore tone. I'm sheriff, and what I say goes."

"Not any more!" drawled Hatfield. "The game's up, fat man. I'm a Texas Ranger, and I'm arrestin' yuh for the murder of Hannibal Haines!"

STARKE got still in the saddle. His eyes narrowed until they were pale slivers buried in the rolls of fat. Then he shrugged, chuckled.

"Reckon yuh're jokin, busky," he said.

"There's no joke to a hangrope." Hatfield opened his palm, and in it was a silver shield. "Killin' Haines is just one of the crimes yuh'll have to answer for."

"You're loco!" shouted Starke. "Why would I kill Haines?"

"That's for you to answer—before a jury. All I know is that yuh did it."

"What give yuh that idea?"

"Haines was killed with a forty-four. You pack a pair of forty-fours."

"So do a lot of other hombres. If that's all, yuh're shoutin' up the wrong stump."

"It's not. The man who killed Haines stood in an alley across the back street from the print shop and fired through a window. He leaned against a warehouse wall, likely to get a steady aim. What the killer didn't know was that a sign had been painted on that wall a few hours before, and the paint was still wet. Red paint, Sheriff."

"Blast you, Ranger!" howled Starke. "What's all that got to do with me?"

"Just this," the Lone Wolf said grimly. "The first thing I noticed, when yuh come into the print shop just after Haines was killed, was a smear of red paint on the back of yore coat. It was the letter M. I didn't savvy what it meant until I saw that wet paint on the warehouse a little later. You shot Haines, then circled through the jail from the back and come out in front. You were breathin' hard—"

With a wicked snarl of fury, Starke grabbed for one of the pearl-handled guns. But Hatfield had anticipated the move, and was driving Goldy forward. The gun cleared leather, bellowed, searing the Ranger's face with powder flame. Then, before the crooked lawman could pull trigger again, Hatfield's steel-thewed fingers gripped his shoulders.

Hatfield jerked, twisted, and the sheriff was dragged from saddle and slammed violently against the ground. The Ranger followed him in a headlong dive. Starke, although nearly stunned by the impact with the ground, rolled over, cursing, and tried to bring up his gun again.

Hatfield's hurtling body smashed him back against the ground. And when Starke tried to rise again the Ranger blasted a flinty fist into his flabby face.

This time, the sheriff lay writhing and moaning. Hatfield took his guns. For several moments there was wild excitement among the possemen. They crowded about the cowering, turncoat sheriff, glaring at him, mouthing threats.

"So that fat swine was in with El Gato all the time!" one of them exclaimed. "I thought there was somethin' fishy about him not havin' any luck cuttin' that sidewinder's sign. Get a rope, somebody! Let's string the polecat up right here!"

Starke, his gross body shivering as if with the ague, started whining and begging for his life. Hatfield looked at him with a feeling of revulsion. A puncher had taken a rope from his saddle-horn and was feverishly building a noose.

"Bring the murderin' skunk over to this cottonwood!" he yelled.

Starke's whimper rose to a hoarse scream as rough hands seized him.

Hatfield had remained quiet, watching, but he said quietly;

"Just a minute, boys. I'll admit that his neck needs stretchin', bad. And it will be. But ain't yuh forgettin' the most important thing? Webb Addison and his daughter are in danger."

"That's a fact," Smoky Shane admitted. "But it won't take long to 'tend to this job."

"That's not the point." The tall Ranger turned and said flatly to Starke, "Hombre, which had yuh rather do? Lead us to El Gato's hideout, or stretch hemp?"

"I—I don't know where the hideout is," Starke whined.

"All right, boys," Hatfield spat, turning away. "Yuh've got the rope, and there's the cottonwood!"

"Wait—wait!" the fat man begged. "Don't hang me! I'll lead yuh to El Gato's hideout."

"That's more like it." Hatfield turned back. "But don't try any tricks, or yuh'll beg for a nice, comfortable hangin'! This

is the reason I didn't arrest yuh last night. I wanted yuh out here in the badlands where yuh wouldn't have a chance to crawfish!"

EL GATO'S voice was soft, modulated, almost pleasant. His dark, high-cheeked features were composed. Yet there was about him an invisible savagery that plucked at him like a violent gust of wind.

Seated in the deep leather chair, he turned a keen-bladed scalpel slowly in his slender fingers. Light from the wall-bracketed lamps struck with a sharp brilliance at the razor-keen blade. The silken curtain swayed gently in the soft breeze that blew endlessly through this ancient tunnel.

Webb Addison and his daughter, Janet, bound to straight-backed chairs, sat facing the bandit chieftain. They had been brought to this fantastic cavern an hour before, and since then they had listened to the velvety drone of El Gato's voice. Occasionally he had risen to pace the floor, graceful as his namesake and as silent as he trod the thick Oriental rugs, the only sign of his impatience.

Neither Addison nor Janet was fooled by the outlaw's show of gentleness. Beneath this veneer lay a fierce cruelty and ruthlessness that was apt to erupt with volcanic suddenness. Sweat beaded the rancher's forehead and ran over his face. Fear was a dark, live thing in the girl's eyes.

"So you see, my friend," El Gato murmured, turning the blade in his fingers, "there is no need for further lying. I've been patient. But I haven't fooled you, any more than you have fooled me. I am aware that you know where the treasure is hidden, and you know that I intend to force you to tell where it is, one way or another. So lying will gain you nothing."

"I'm not lyin', I tell yuh!" Addison's voice was harsh, ragged. "If I knew where it was I'd tell yuh."

"All I know is that you haven't. You admit that you and Dan Thorp, who is now dead, were the two who escaped with the treasure chest across the Rio Grande that night fifteen years ago, don't you?"

"Yes, I told yuh that! And I told yuh how Thorp doublecrossed me, stole the loot from the cave where we'd hid it and cached it somewheres else. I never saw it again."

El Gato smiled sardonically. "And you expect me to believe that?"

"I can't help it if yuh don't," said Addison. "It's the truth. My heavens, man, do yuh think I'd lie about a boxful of stolen outlaw loot when the lives of both myself and my daughter are at stake?"

"I've made no threats," El Gato reminded.

"Yuh didn't have to. I know what yuh did to Bill Jason, and Sam Logan, and others. I know that there's nothin' too wicked and low for yuh to do. Yuh're no better than a mad wolf, killin' and burnin' because yuh love the smell of blood!"

"Father!" Janet's voice was sharp, pleading. She said to the bandit leader, "I'm certain he's told the truth about the treasure. I'm sure that if he knew anything about it he would tell you."

Addison's outburst had brought a glitter of anger to El Gato's black eyes, but now he smiled and bowed mockingly.

"A pity you had to be dragged into this, Miss Addison. Believe me, it was not my wish, and would not have happened except for your father's stubbornness. I have no wish to harm you."

Addison's anger was still sharp and rash. "Lyin' won't get you anywhere, either, yuh bloody-handed swine!" he spat. "Kill me if yuh want to, and to thunderation with yuh! But touch my girl and I—I'll—"

El Gato got abruptly to his feet, the keen-bladed scalpel clutched in his hand. His voice was like a whiplash.

"Hold your tongue, you fool, or I'll cut it out by the roots! Yes, I am all those things you call me. I like to inflict pain, I enjoy seeing men—and women—suffer. Maybe knowing that will help you to make up your mind."

"My mind is made up!" Addison said firmly. "I'd tell yuh what yuh want to know, if I could. But I doubt now if even that would keep you from torturin' and killin' us. I'm through beggin' and crawlin'. So get on with yore devilish work, yuh hound out of Tophet!"

El Gato stepped quickly around the table. Fury was a wild, violent thing in his sable eyes. He glided toward Addison, the murderous surgical knife in

hand, but paused suddenly and shook his head.

"I have found it wise to never let pleasure interfere with business," he murmured.

He turned away from Addison, crossed and stood before Janet. He regarded her speculatively.

"You have beautiful eyes, my dear," he murmured. "Like blue velvet laced with purple flames.

"You—what are you going to do to me?" she stammered.

"That depends entirely on your father. If the lights should leave those eyes they would become dull and ugly, which would be a pity. I love beauty. But pain is beautiful, to me."

"Yuh filth-muckin' buzzard!" Addison ground out hoarsely. "Touch my girl and I'll tear yuh apart!"

"You are as helpless as you are foolish, my friend," El Gato said with deadly calm. "And you have exactly two minutes to reveal where the treasure is hidden. After that it will be too late—for your daughter!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Death Gamble

GRIM-FACED possemen forged steadily onward through the weird, lost world of the Devil's Playground. Beside Hatfield who led them now rode the ex-sheriff, Judd Starke, tied to the saddle. In his pale eyes was the certain knowledge that if he attempted treachery he would be shown no mercy by the tall, cold-eyed rider on the golden sorrel.

They rode in silence for the most part, with the creak of saddle leather, the echo of iron-shod hoofs among fantastically carved walls, the only sounds. But on each stony face was written the same implacable determination—to erase from this range once and for all the threat of El Gato and his killers, to avenge any harm that had come to Webb Addison and his daughter.

If Starke was tempted to lead them astray, to plead ignorance of the outlaws' hideout, one sideward glance at the Lone Wolf's coldly merciless face was enough to make him change his mind. They came to the rushing Cinnabar, swerved and followed its tortuous course, threading through towering spires and deep canyons.

Suddenly Hatfield lifted his hand, and the cavalcade clattered to a halt. For the last several moments the Ranger had been covertly watching Starke, aware of the furtive, cunning light in the fat prisoner's chalky eyes.

"How much farther?" Hatfield asked.

"Oh, several miles," Starke said evasively. "I don't know just how many."

"Yuh're lyin'!" the Ranger spat, hand falling to gun-butt. "Don't forget, that rope's still handy."

The prisoner turned sullen. "Half a mile ahead. There the river flows through the entrance to a little hidden valley. That's where the hideout is."

Convinced that Starke was telling the truth, Hatfield ordered a slow advance. And, moments later, they came to the spot where the stream slashed with a booming roar through a narrow pass between towering cliffs that reared abruptly before them.

Again the Lone Wolf called a halt, regarding the narrow passage warily. Half a dozen armed men, stationed at advantageous spots on those pitted walls, could hold off several times the number of men in the posse.

"El Gato keep any guards stationed here?" Hatfield asked the prisoner.

Starke shook his head sullenly. "Never knowed of it if he did. He was confident nobody'd ever find this place."

"Any other way out of that canyon?"

Again Starke shook his head. "The rivers goes out through another canyon at the far end. But there're no ledges on the sides like there are here. And the river's too rough to swim."

"We've got the hellions hemmed like rats in a trap!" a posseman declared excitedly. "We'll wipe 'em out!"

"Mebbe," the Ranger agreed quietly. He asked Starke, "How is the layout inside the canyon?"

Starke obeyed Hatfield's instructions, knowing that all hope of escaping or outwitting the bleak-faced Ranger was now gone. He drew a word picture of the canyonlike valley's interior, showing the location of the several cabins where the

bandit's men bunked.

"Will Addison and the girl—and El Gato—be in one of those cabins?"

Starke hesitated, then shook his head. "Likely El Gato took 'em to his den back in the tunnels."

"Tunnels?" Hatfield eyed the prisoner sharply. "El Gato doesn't bunk with his men, then?"

"No. Most of 'em never saw him more'n half a dozen times. He gives orders through a lieutenant, and most of the time he keeps to hisself with his books and knives and other queer things he has there in the cave."

Pressed by Hatfield, the prisoner explained in detail about the cave, its location, how to reach it.

"All right, boys," the Lone Wolf said then. "Let's get inside. Keep yore eyes peeled, yore guns handy, and don't make any more racket than yuh can help."

In single file, they went along the narrow, slippery ledge that flanked the stream through the mist filled pass. Here chill currents of air swirled about them, and the hollow booming of the leaping water beat at them with an almost physical violence. Inside the valley, they proceeded slowly forward, concealed by dense thickets and jumbled walls.

WHEN, according to Starke, they were a quarter of a mile from the cabins, Hatfield once again called a halt. With the sheriff eliminated he had automatically assumed the leadership, and nobody—not even Jeff Ryder—thought of questioning his authority. Now he dismounted, ordered the others to do likewise.

"We'll leave the hosses here in this thicket," he said crisply. "We want to surprise the varmints if we can. While we want to make shore none of them get away, we also want to hold down killin's as low as we can—on our side especially."

"What about Janet—and her father?" Jeff Ryder asked worriedly. "Accordin' to Starke, they'll likely be up in the cave with El Gato. When the shootin' starts down below, he'll know somethin's gone wrong. It'll likely take some time to wipe out the hellions, and durin' that time—Well, knowin' his goose is cooked anyhow, no tellin' what that inhuman devil may do!"

"I'd thought of that," Hatfield admitted quietly. "And yuh're right. It's almost a cinch that El Gato—or Nick Dorn—knowin' that he's doomed, would take out his hate and spite on Addison and the girl. That leaves only one thing to do. *El Gato* will have to be put out of the way before the alarm is given."

"But how?" insisted Ryder. "Yuh'd have to get into the cave without bein' seen by the men at the cabins."

"I don't know how, but it's got to be done." The Ranger's lips flattened against his teeth, he squared his powerful shoulders. "There's a way to do nearly everything. Jeff, yuh're in charge here, yuh'll boss the attack. Spread out, get on as many sides of 'em as yuh can, then give 'em a chance to lay down their guns. If they don't—well, yuh'll all know what to do. Just remember that they're all cold-blooded killers and deserve little mercy."

"But what about you?" Ryder asked anxiously.

"If yuh hear shootin', cut loose yore wolves, because then yuh'll know I've failed. If yuh don't, give me twenty minutes before yuh start the fireworks. Savvy?"

The possemen nodded, watched silently as the big Ranger slipped away into the hemming underbrush. Two hundred yards to his left Hatfield could see the towering red walls that marked the western side of the valley. Threading through the thickets and cliffs with the stealth of an Indian, he went toward these walls. He gained their base and crept along it, eyes wary, ears strained for any sound that might mean danger.

Moments later, he crouched at the edge of an open space that held several log cabins, and pole corrals filled with long-legged horses. A score or more of gun-belted, tough-looking men were in sight, some talking in small groups, some lying singly in the shade of pines, several carrying water in pails from the nearby stream to pour into troughs inside the corrals. Smoke curled from the adobe chimneys of two of the cabins. Here, the Ranger knew, was the hideout of El Gato's outlaw gang.

His gaze shifted to the walls behind the cabins, traveled over the ancient and grotesque pictographs that covered their

sides, and riveted on the crude rock steps that extended upward to a ledge that was roofed by an overhang of the cliff. He knew then that Starke had been accurate and exact in his descriptions. Dimly he could see the dark opening that marked the entrance to the bandit leader's fantastic underground den.

Swiftly, because he knew that each second might be precious, the Lone Wolf's keen eyes studied the lay-out before him, gauging his chances of reaching that cave entrance. The base of the walls between him and the crude steps was lined with boulders and shrubbery.

While the steps and ledge were no more than fifty yards from the cabins, they were partly hidden from view by a thin line of pines. On guard, the loafing outlaws would instantly detect any prowler trying to enter the cave. But there was a scant chance he could make it.

Throwing himself flat on the ground, Hatfield started wriggling forward along the base of the wall. He covered ten feet, twenty. He knew the gamble he was making and accepted it without hesitation. A snapped twig, a dislodged pebble, the clank of a boot against a rock, any of these things might expose him.

And caught here, he wouldn't have a chance. The outlaws would cut him to pieces without mercy, and the fact that they themselves would be shredded by posse lead moments later would not help him in the least.

THE steps drew in slowly toward him. Now they were forty feet away, now twenty, and then he crouched at their base. There was no time for hesitation now. Flattened against the ancient black rock, he crawled slowly but steadily up the steps. His nerves screamed with the expectation of discovery from the cabins. His flesh crawled with the imaginary slash of lead. The ascent seemed endless.

Then he was on the ledge, the upthrust rim protecting him from the view of those below. Hatfield drew a long breath into his lungs, certain now that he had not been discovered. He turned, wriggled through the doorlike opening into the tunnel, and got to his feet. He stood a moment, warily surveying the place, the feel of something ancient and musty pressing upon him.

He saw the pine slivers beside the opening but didn't touch them. Starke had explained how the tunnel extended back into the walls, coming finally to El Gato's queer den.

Hatfield went along the tunnel. The light faded, inky blackness swirled about him. Slowly, cautiously, stifling the impatience that rode him, he felt his way along the dark corridor. There was no turning back now. Within minutes now the valley below would erupt in a blazing holocaust of roaring guns.

Ahead lay the unknown!

The Lone Wolf's muscles tightened suddenly. To his ears had come a human voice, weird and spectral in this subterranean world, but unmistakably human. At the same instant he saw a dim glow of light ahead. The glow, while remaining indistinct, as if seen through a mist, increased as he advanced.

The Ranger stopped suddenly, realizing why the light had seemed to shine through a weird blue fog. Before him, stretching across the tunnel, was a blue silken curtain. The light was shining throught this curtain. The human voice, louder now, also emanated from beyond it.

His nerves tightly drawn, Hatfield drew an edge of the curtain slightly aside and peered into what proved to be a well-lighted, lavishly furnished underground room. The first sweep of his amazed eyes took in the rich Oriental rugs covering the floor, the books and pictures lining the planked walls, the gleaming tables, surgical instruments and glass cases. But he had no time to marvel at these things.

Webb Addison sat bound to a chair, perspiration streaming over his face that was set in a bitter mask of despair and rage. In another chair, several feet away, sat Janet. Her face was white, her eyes filled with fear and horror.

This slender, dark, evil-faced man, Hatfield guessed instantly, was the dreaded El Gato. In his hand the bandit held an uncorked bottle filled with a brownish liquid. On the table beside him lay a long-bladed knife. The dark man was smiling, a sardonic grimace of utter wickedness and cruelty.

He looked over his shoulder at the bound man.

"The two minutes are up, Addison," he said. "I trust that you will enjoy your

daughter's agony as much as I do. This acid is deadly."

He lifted the bottle. The girl screamed, a shrill, terror-filled sound that echoed on and on through the tunnels.

CHAPTER XIX

Ranger at Bay

VIOLENTLY Jim Hatfield ripped aside the curtain, leaped through into the room, gun in hand. His voice had the trumpet-like ring of Arctic winds blowing through snowy mountains. "Drop it, yuh killin' snake, if yuh want to live!"

El Gato whirled with incredible quickness, his arm arced, and the brownish liquid sprayed from the open bottle mouth, straight at the Ranger's face. Hatfield flung himself desperately aside, going to his knees, feeling something that was like the stab of a red-hot needle against his cheek as a drop of the deadly acid hit him. The gun in his hand had blazed as he rocketed aside, but he missed.

He saw the bandit leader continue his whirl, his face a dark snarling mask of fury, and snatch up the slender-bladed knife. Even as the Ranger brought up his gun again, the cornered hellion drove at him, the upraised blade glittering in the lamplight, his first huge, catlike leap covering half the distance between them.

Hatfield's gun blasted again. El Gato seemed to break in the middle, but his forward momentum was so violent that he slammed into the Ranger, and then to the carpeted floor, the murderous surgical knife still clutched in his fist.

Hatfield heard a noise behind him, and whirled to his feet. He was just in time. A huge, bizarre figure had torn aside the silken curtain and lunged into the room —a giant Oriental, big-jawed, slant-eyed, with a dangling yellow mustache, and dressed in flowing robes of blue and crimson silk. In his hand the yellow giant held a short, vicious-looking sword with a wavy blade known as a kris.

Without seeming to move his hand, the giant threw the kris. Lamplight glittered on the murderous blade as it flashed straight at the Lone Wolf's chest.

Again Hatfield flung himself frantically aside, slamming three quick shots at the swordsman as he fell, the shots so close-spaced that they sounded like one thunderous explosion. The sword plucked at his shirt, and buried itself half way to its hilt in the cave wall logs. Hatfield hit on his shoulders, somersaulted, came to his feet. The gun snaked up again.

But the slant-eyed giant was down on his knees, all humped over, clutching at his stomach. Then he fell slowly forward and lay still, like a man going to sleep.

Both the man known as El Gato and his Oriental companion were dead.

Webb Addison was staring at the big Ranger, awe and unbelief in his eyes. Janet was sobbing with relief.

Hatfield released the girl first, supporting her with a big arm as she almost collapsed. Then he took care of Addison.

"Yuh got here just in time, Ranger," Addison declared, his voice unsteady. "That devil meant to blind my girl, and I don't know what else. He wouldn't believe I couldn't tell him where the treasure was hid. I'd given up hope—I expected no help. I wouldn't have believed anybody could get into this cave. How'd yuh do it?"

Hatfield shrugged. "That can be explained later. Did he harm either of yuh?"

"No—thanks to you," Janet said, drying her eyes. "But I'm sure that in another minute he would have done something awful. I hope that nasty treasure is never found!"

"It has been found," the Ranger told them quietly. "But it won't cause any more trouble. It will be returned to Mexico, where it originally came from and, as far as is possible, to its rightful owners."

"That suits me fine," the rancher declared feelingly. "I wish I'd never heard of the cursed stuff. It's caused a lot of sufferin' and dyin'." He frowned uneasily. "But what about—well, the part I played in bringin' it here?"

"Legally, I reckon the law could hold yuh accountable. But there are"—the Ranger's eyes twinkled—"what the lawyers would call 'extenuatin' circumstances.' I don't think yuh need to worry about it. So far as the law is concerned, I think I can promise yuh the secret will be kept."

Addison heaved a sigh of relief.

"Yuh're a real man, Ranger, in more ways than one!"

Flushing, Hatfield said hastily, "This job's not finished. There's a whole passel of the hellions outside to be taken care of. Let's get out there. Jeff Ryder might need help."

TAKING one of the bracketed lamps, they went quickly back through the tunnel to the ledge overlooking the small valley. And there Hatfield saw that the battle between the posse and El Gato's followers, if there had been one, was already over. Stern-faced possemen rimmed the edges of the clearing that held the cabins, leveled guns in hand. Sullen-eyed outlaws, hands upraised, their own guns littering the ground, were converging into a group in the center of the open space.

Obviously the owlhooters had been taken by surprise, and had surrendered almost without firing a shot. This, Hatfield soon found out, was the case.

Jeff Ryder, after flashing a grin of admiration and thanks at Hatfield, went straight to Janet Addison and took her in his arms. While she was explaining to him what had happened in the cave, the Ranger was supervising the tying-up of the outlaws. When the task was completed, explanations were made.

Hatfield told the possemen about the chestful of loot he had found in the icy depths of Badwater Springs, not mentioning, however that the loot had been brought into Texas by Dan Throp and Webb Addison. Jeff Ryder already knew the whole story.

The possemen, while amazed at the part the loot of El Lobo Rojo had played in the sinister happenings of the last few months, were interested principally in the fact that the pall of fear and dread that had hovered over their homes was lifted.

"And yuh can thank just one man for it—Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf," Jeff Ryder declared.

"I had plenty of help." Hatfield's friendly grin flashed. "Besides, a Ranger neither wants nor deserves thanks for doin' his duty. It was the job I was sent here to do, and I'm glad it's finished." He frowned, his eyes probing among the prisoners. "Where's Sheriff Starke?"

The possemen shuffled their feet, looking at each other. Then a grizzled rancher waved his hand vaguely.

"The sheriff's out yonder. While we was busy corralin' these sidewinders, he thought he saw a chance to make a break. Well, we figgered wasn't but one way to stop him, so we done it!"

Hatfield said nothing else. He understood that the men of this wild Texas frontier valley had settled in their own way with the traitor.

He turned, started to say something to Jeff Ryder. But Ryder and Janet had stepped to one side. They were looking into each other's eyes, and smiling. . . .

* * * * *

"So that's how it was," the Lone Wolf explained to Cap'n Bill McDowell several days later, in the crusty old Ranger Captain's office in Austin. "El Gato has clawed so long and hard he'd kind of blunted his clawers. So when he started clawin' at me, I just clawed back, and I reckon I clawed a little the deepest."

"Yuh usually do, dag-nab it!" Captain Bill grinned with open affection at his lieutenant. "Don't know what I'd do without yuh. 'Course, now when I was yore age— Cuss dang this blasted rheumatism! Wasn't for that, I'd be in the saddle and headed for the Staked Plains, right now!"

"Trouble up there?" Hatfield asked.

"All tarnation has busted loose! I've got a letter here, somewhere. Been kind of savin' the job for you. That Goldy hoss of yores in good shape?"

"Fine as frog hair and full of ginger."

"How about yoreself? How soon can yuh start?"

"I'd like to have a couple hours sleep."

"Take four," the Old Ranger Captain growled, scowling darkly. "If a Ranger ever slept more'n four hours at a time the owlhoots'd plumb take Texas over. Then hit leather, get up there and fix whatever's wrong!"

The Lone Wolf lawman grinned lazily, unwound his long legs from about the chair, got up and walked out. Exactly four hours later, mounted on the prancing golden sorrel, he rode out of Austin, headed northward toward the lawless Staked Plains. Headed, as always, toward the most troubled spot in the great Lone Star State, to bring Ranger law and justice to its people.

There was something deadly in the way Duke looked at Littlejohn.

LONG SAM'S COYOTE CURE

By LEE BOND

Outlawed rider Littlejohn puts up a fight against odds when he strives to rescue a youngster from a pair of sidewinders!

WHEN the roaring shots that knocked young Tommy Galvin out of the saddle threw their thunder against the hot Texas sky, Long Sam Littlejohn was already off his horse. He cursed the pain of a bullet-wounded leg as he crouched down beneath a patch of brush.

Littlejohn reached quickly for the two black-butted six-shooters that rode his thighs in tied-down holsters. He saw Tommy Galvin rock in the saddle, fling up both arms, and tumble off over the rump of the sleek sorrel. The sorrel went up the trail like it's tail was on fire, and Tommy Galvin did a double somersault

before he rolled to a stop against a rock.

"They got him!" Littlejohn muttered.

The riderless sorrel vanished around a bend in the thicket-flanked trail with stirrups popping. Long Sam Littlejohn sat hunkered there in the thicket, a gaunt, unusually tall man, clad in jet-black garments that would offer no flash of color to catch the eye of anyone riding past. Or would anyone be coming up that sandy trail? That thought occurred to Littlejohn when he realized that there were no sounds of riders approaching.

"Looks like they aren't going to follow him after all," Littlejohn said. "Too bad —I aimed to take a hand in this!"

He had expected riders, to be sure. It seemed only natural to suppose that the men who shot young Tommy Galvin would spur up over the little bench yonder and come on to view the results of their cowardly work.

Jogging along the trail on the weary old splay-footed, ewe-necked roan he called Sleeper, Long Sam Littlejohn had heard the dull beat of hoofs coming from below that little bench before the rider was in sight.

He had plunged Sleeper off the trail and into this thicket, then watched young Galvin come over the brow of the bench to sway and fall under the hammering blow of bullets as guns roared behind him.

LITTLEJOHN had heard the muffled churning of hoofs below the bench even as the boy fell tumbling before his eyes. But the riders who had shot Tommy Galvin had been wheeling about, riding back the way they had come. That was obvious now, and suddenly Long Sam Littlejohn stood up, something cold and angry in his smoke-colored eyes.

He shoved the two black-butted six-shooters into holsters, turned and caught up the reins of the ugly roan horse, Sleeper. Yet he hesitated a moment longer there in the screening thicket, smoky eyes searching as much of the trail as he could see.

Outlawed, with a sizable chunk of money offered for his dead-or-alive capture, he had to be almighty careful about letting other men get too close to him. Badge men in general, and a derby-wearing little deputy U. S. marshal by the name of Joe Fry in particular, made it dangerous for him to move too boldly along such well used trails as the one that lay before him.

But the trail seemed empty of riders now, and the gaunt outlaw heaved a sigh of relief as he led his roan out to the trail and across to the boulder where Tommy Galvin lay.

The boy was slim, tall and still a little gawky, but beginning to fill out through the shoulders. Tommy, Long Sam thought somberly as he squatted beside the lad, was seventeen or thereabouts. And now there was the task of riding over yonder to where Fred Galvin's Circle G ranch spread all over Trabuco Canyon, and telling Fred and Dora Galvin that their boy had been killed.

"Telling them will shore be tough," he said.

Long Sam Littlejohn's smoky eyes dulled with the dread of that chore. His gaunt, pain-drawn face looked even more drawn when he stretched Tommy Galvin out face down, studying the blood soaked back of the youngster's shirt. Two slugs had hit Tommy—one high and well out towards the point of his left shoulder, the other lower down and on the right.

The gaunt outlaw's head flung up, his smoky eyes raking the rail up and down in swift glances. Then he turned his attention to Tommy Galvin again, rolling the boy over, aiming to unbutton his shirt and see where the bullet that had hit him low in the back had come out. But suddenly Littlejohn stared. A look first of disbelief then relief mirrored in his smoky eyes.

"Blazes!" he exclaimed. "Mebbe he's still alive!"

He had tilted Tommy Galvin up on one side, and was looking down into the lean young face that was so pale. Tommy's nostrils twitched, flared slightly. He was breathing!

Littlejohn got to Sleeper, and got up into saddle, cradling Tommy Galvin in his arms. He turned the ugly roan off the trail and went down into the thickets eastward. Silently he cursed the ill-luck that made it necessary that he take to the thickets instead of riding back north along the trail to where an east fork swung over the ridges to Trabuco Canyon and Fred Galvin's Circle G.

But Long Sam Littlejohn dared not ride back up that trail. Joe Fry, deputy U. S. marshal out of Austin, was pounding sand southward along that very trail, following Long Sam's spoor!

Littlejohn looked down into Tommy's pale face, shifting the lad to a better position. He saw and felt a bulky something inside Tommy's shirt, and discovered that it was wedged between their bodies. He wanted no unnecessary pressure against the wounded boy's body, and promptly unbuttoned Tommy's shirt.

The gaunt outlaw's fingers found a bundle that was wrapped in what touch told him was stout canvas. He drew it out, and saw that it was indeed canvas. Bold, black letters across the bag said: STOCKMAN'S BANK. Below that, in smaller letters, Los Robles, Texas, was printed.

A FEELING of mingled puzzlement and uneasiness set Long Sam Littlejohn to working at the draw-string of the money sack with teeth and the one hand he could keep free. But even through the thick canvas sack, he could tell by the crisp, crinkly feel of the packet inside the sack that it was paper money.

Long Sam Littlejohn's smoky eyes popped wide, and a low, startled expression slid from his grim mouth. The bills were clean and crisp, held together by a wide paper band. The bills Littlejohn's staring eyes could see were hundred dollar denominations, and the paper band about the packet had $10,000 printed across it.

"A hundred bills, each good for one hundred dollars at any bank," the outlaw muttered in growing amazement. "But how in blazes did this button get hold of that kind of—"

Littlejohn's voice ended abruptly. A gun went off behind him, back about the spot where he had left the trail.

"Halt!" a harsh and very familiar voice yowled. "Rein up, or I'll blast yuh both out of that saddle!"

"Joe Fry!" Littlejohn groaned.

The outlaw glanced down at Tommy Galvin, stuffing the packet of money back in the sack as he studied the boy's wan face. He pushed the sacked money inside the front of his own black shirt, and touched Sleeper's gaunted sides with dull spurs.

As the big roan bored through the brush at a faster pace, Littlejohn looked back, puzzled over Joe Fry being able to see him. He saw at a glance that he had actually ridden downhill after leaving the trail, coming into a shallow swale.

Joe Fry was over there beside the trail, off his horse and kneeling to get his elbows knee-rested while he sighted a rifle. Fry fired, the slug screeching off a stout branch scant feet to Littlejohn's left before the roar of the rifle reached him.

The gaunt outlaw heaved a sigh of relief when Sleeper hit a crooked but well-used stock trail. It turned and twisted like all stock trails through the pear and mesquite country did, going around patches of brush and searching out all natural lanes and clearings.

Littlejohn thought nothing about it, therefore, when Sleeper walked around a sharp turn in the trail and started out into a little clearing fifty feet across and about twice that long.

But the gaunt outlaw knew suddenly that he had ridden into some sort of trap by entering that clearing. Sleeper stopped, hind quarters squatting, muscles bunched and ready for quick movements. The roan's ugly head swung from right to left, piggish eyes rolling towards thick brush on each side of the clearing.

Littlejohn balanced Tommy Galvin's weight in his left arm, and let his right hand drift down close to the butt of a six-shooter.

"Steady, Sam!" a cold voice said. "Duke's acrost the trail yonder, on yore left. We've got yuh boxed."

"The Tutter brothers, Duke and Alf," Littlejohn said sourly. "What are you two brush hogs doin' this far from that thing you call a ranch down yonder where Catfish Creek empties into the Rio?"

"You ain't in no position to get mouthy, Littlejohn!" Duke Tutter's thin-edged voice came from the left flank of the trail.

"And I ain't in no position to set here arguin' with you two!" the gaunt outlaw retorted. "Or had you noticed that derby-hatted little hombre in a checkered store suit and button shoes who was takin' pot-shots at me a while ago?"

"We seen that galoot come down the trail and figgered him for a drummer," Alf's Tutter's deep voice rumbled. "Duke

and me ducked into the brush thinkin' that dude drummer would ride on down the trail towards Los Robles. But he starts readin' sign up there where yuh'd gathered up that Galvin kid yuh're luggin', and peeled out a rifle when he sighted yuh acrost the swale."

"That gent in the derby handles a rifle better than any dude I ever seen before," Duke Tutter said uneasily. "Howcome he's faunchin' for yore scalp, Littlejohn?"

"That hombre you two mistook for a drummer happens to be one of the shrewdest, most dangerous man-hunters in the Southwest," Littlejohn said flatly. "He's a deputy U. S. marshal, and works out of Austin. You two have likely heard about him. His name's Joe Fry."

DUKE and Alf Tutter had obviously heard of Joe Fry, famous man-hunter. Their alarmed cursing, and the sounds they made shifting around in the brush told Long Sam Littlejohn that.

"Fry's an expert at trackin', so it won't take him long to hit my sign and come this way," Littlejohn snapped. "You two set on yore hunkers in the brush and mutter-cuss if yuh want to. I'm pushin' on."

"Mebbe you'd better move on, at that," Alf Tutter said coldly. "But don't rush it, Sammy boy. Just set tight until Duke rides out in the trail in front of yuh. Duke'll ride point on down the trail, while I bring up the drag. That'll still keep yuh in the middle."

"What's the idea in you two bristlin' up at me like this?" Littlejohn countered. "That buzzard's roost you two call the Rockin' T ranch down yonder on the river is a place where border-hoppin' renegades can hide out, providin' said border-hopper has enough cash money to lay on the line. You two are supposed to be friendly to noose-bait like me."

"Quit stallin', Littlejohn!" Duke Tutter's thin voice lashed out. "Alf and me know yuh seen us back yonder on the trail, after we'd blasted that Galvin kid outa the saddle with slugs. Is that nosey little fool dead?"

Long Sam Littlejohn felt as if the whole matt of yellow hair was standing straight up under his dusty Stetson. He started to say something, but thought better of it.

Duke Tutter was out in the trail, a tall man who sat the saddle loosely. Duke had a pearl handled six-shooter in his right hand, and there was something deadly in the way his pale blue eyes squinted at Long Sam Littlejohn. Tutter's hair was as coarse and black as his bay pony's mane, and there was a darkness in his hawk-nosed, thin-mouthed face that even the broiling Texas sun could not have put there.

"I asked yuh a question, Littlejohn," Duke Tutter said coldly. "I asked yuh if that Galvin younker is dead or not, and I'll put a bullet through yore gizzard if yuh don't answer me!"

"Shut up, Duke, and get to movin'!" Alf Tutter snapped before Long Sam could answer. "If yuh hadn't kept suckin' on that bottle all day yuh'd be sober enough to see by Tommy Galvin's color that he's still alive."

Duke Tutter's face had turned a sickly yellow-brown color, and his pale eyes seemed glued to Tommy Galvin's unmoving figure in a stare that had both alarm and cold hatred in it. That Duke Tutter was more than just a little inclined to shoot Tommy Galvin was only too obvious, and Long Sam Littlejohn let his right hand ease down to where he could make a play for one of his own guns if he had to.

"What's the matter, Duke?" Alf Tutter's voice lashed out. "You act like you was seein' a ghost instead of just a bullet-crippled kid who come nosin' around our Chigger Crick holdin' pens, tryin' to make out the brands on them cattle Short Vinson and his bunch was restin' up for a fast push to the river tonight. Or did yuh mebbe forget to tell yore big brother the truth about why yuh was so blood-sweatin' afraid to have Tommy Galvin get home alive?"

"If you wasn't my own brother I'd slip a bullet 'tween yore teeth for talkin' to me like that," Duke Tutter said harshly.

Long Sam looked over his shoulder at Alf Tutter, who was riding out into the trail. Alf was big and rawboned, with beefy shoulders and thick, powerfully muscled arms and legs. He had the same coarse black hair, mustache and hawk-nosed, pale-eyed looks that Duke Tutter had.

"Move on, Duke!" Alf grunted. "And quit sprainin' yore neck ganderin' at me, Littlejohn. Yuh've seen me before."

LITTLEJOHN faced forward without comment, and touched Sleeper's sides gently with spurs as Duke Tutter started riding down the trail. Duke rode hipped around in the saddle, and kept his six-shooter in his hand. He still looked pale around the mouth, and his eyes were getting bloodshot and mean looking as he watched Tommy Galvin's brown-thatched head sway limply from side to side.

Duke Tutter was heading for the renegade hangout the Tutter's called a ranch down yonder at the mouth of Catfish Creek, and Long Sam's nerves crawled like live things in his flesh when he thought of that ten thousand dollars inside his shirtfront. And there was the badly wounded boy Littlejohn had in his arms.

Duke Tutter's obvious desire to blast the last feeble spark of life out of young Tommy Galvin gave Long Sam Littlejohn a feeling that Tommy might know something Duke did not want told. And judging by what Alf Tutter had said a little earlier, he, too, suspected that Duke had reasons for wanting Tommy's tongue forever stilled.

"You and Alf sorta crowded me into this play, Duke," Long Sam said gravely. "Or are yuh forcin' me to ride some place I mebbe don't want to go?"

"Try ridin' ary direction except to foller me and yuh'll get a bullet in yore briskit, yuh crane-legged hellion!" Duke Tutter sneered. "You poked yore blasted nose into this deal when you taken Tommy Galvin up on yore saddle and rode off into the thickets with him. Aim to lug him home to his mammy and daddy, I'll bet!"

"I aimed to take Tommy home," Long Sam said evenly. "He's only a youngster, and not even packin' a gun. If he dies, Duke, every man in this country will be lookin' for the man or men who killed him!"

"You blabbermouthed fool, I'll learn you to give me lip!" Duke Tutter yelled, and started chopping the six-shooter down for a point-blank shot at Long Sam's face.

But Alf Tutter's horse suddenly shot forward, and Alf's deep voice boomed a warning that stopped his younger brother cold.

"Pull that trigger, Duke, and I'll stomp yore drunken head off!" Alf said in a cold, flat tone. "We'll take care of Littlejohn when the sign comes right, in case he don't want to see things our way. But you fire a shot here, and there'll be a ring of armed men around these thickets before the shot quits echoin'. Or are yuh too drunk to remember that the country is crawlin' with badge men, and the townsmen, cowboys and ranchers they've depitized?"

Duke Tutter was shaking a little, and his pale eyes glared deadly hatred at Long Sam Littlejohn. But he lowered the spiked hammer of his gun, shoved the weapon into leather, and pulled a nearly empty quart bottle out of a saddle pocket. He squinted at the amber fluid in the bottle, then uncorked it and drank deeply.

Long Sam glanced at Alf Tutter, who was riding almost stirrup to stirrup with him. Alf was scowling and tense, watching his brother out of eyes that were angry and worried. Long Sam's nerves suddenly tightened, and he began slowly easing Tommy Galvin's weight into his left arm. He started sliding his hand gently down to the butt of the six-shooter on his leg, but his long fingers were still inches from their goal when Alf Tutter looked at him.

"If it wasn't for makin' the fuss, I'd let you get hold of that gun, then kill you before you could pull it," he said coldly.

"Yuh can't blame a man for tryin'," Littlejohn grinned ruefully, and slipped his right arm back beneath Tommy Galvin's dangling legs.

DUKE TUTTER had finished drinking, tossed the emptied bottle aside, and was hipped around in the saddle again, six-shooter in his hand, face twisted and mean looking.

"Tried a sneak draw while my back was turned, eh?" he sneered at Littlejohn. "Yuh'd be a dead duck now, Littlejohn, if Alf hadn't been afraid to shoot his pistol."

"What's brought so many badge men and deputized citizens prowlin' the thickets?" Long Sam asked Alf Tutter.

"The Stockman's Bank at Los Robles was robbed this mornin'." The burly gunman shrugged. "Reckon that's it."

"Old Bill Cotter can stand the loss!" Duke Tutter snorted. "Besides all the dinero the dried-up little old whelp has crammed in that Stockman's bank of his,

he owns a half dozen cattle ranches."

The canvas sack inside Long Sam's shirt that held ten thousand dollars in paper money suddenly felt strangely cold and heavy.

"How much loot did the bandits get?" he asked.

"Cal Pitcher, the Los Robles sheriff says just one man done the job," Alf Tutter said. "Young Guy Shaw, the bank's cashier, always shows up about a half hour before openin' time. Somebody got into the bank this mornin', caved Shaw's head in with somethin' heavy—probably a six-shooter—and got clean away.

"Sheriff Pitcher found boot tracks where one man had gone in, then come out, at a window in old Bill Cotter's office, which is at the back of the bank building. Pitcher figures Guy Shaw raised that winder so's Cotter's office would be cooled out a mite when the old coot got there. Nobody'll know how much dinero that bandit got until Bill Cotter and his clerks can check up."

"Old Bill Cotter is shore fit to be tied!" Duke Tutter laughed harshly. "The white-headed little old wart put up a thousand dollars cash money for the capture of the man who killed his cashier. But that bandit is too smart. Nobody'll ever nail him, unless—"

Duke Tutter broke off, licking his lips uneasily as he found his brother's eyes boring coldly into him.

"I started you up to Chigger Crick to collect what Shorty Vinson owes us for usin' them hidden corrals to hold cattle in, the last couple days," Alf said flatly. "You sashayed into town, got yore hide full of busthead whisky, and fetched along a bottle to suck on. But you didn't have brains enough to come past the ranch and tell me that the country was due to be crawlin' with posses."

"I headed for Chigger Crick, aimin' to warn Shorty Vinson that him and his bunch had better take to the brush if they didn't want a posse stumblin' up on them with that herd of stolen cattle!" Duke retorted. "I dropped off the trail and hit Chigger Crick where it heads at Apache Spring.".

"Then what?" Alf asked as his brother paused.

"And there was this Galvin kid, sneakin' up through the bushes to where he'd tied that sorrel of his," went on Duke. "He'd been down the crick on foot, I tell yuh, spyin' on that dumb Shorty Vinson and Shorty's men. That Galvin brat likely knows every brand that was in that bunch of cattle Shorty's holdin', and if yuh're fool enough to let that kid loose to tell what he seen, you and me'll both be in hot water."

"Why didn't yuh nail Tommy then and there?" Long Sam said bluntly.

"The little hellion was on that sorrel and into the thickets before it soaked in on me what he'd been up to!" Duke Tutter snapped. "I'd taken a few shots at him and he bushed up on me. I was staked out waitin' for him to make a try at gettin' out to the trail when Alf showed up."

"A gent in town who gets ten dollars every time he rides out and tips me off when somethin' gets the law stirred up had come to the ranch and told me about the bank robbery," Alf Tutter scowled. "I scattered four-five boys who'd been hangin' around the ranch lately, then lit for Chigger Crick to warn Shorty Vinson that the law was in a stir. I was at the Chigger Crick holdin' pens when I heard Duke shootin'. I went up to have a look-see, naturally."

LITTLEJOHN nodded assent.

"Naturally," Long Sam said drily. "But how'd you two get Tommy smoked out of the thickets and on the run?"

"We hid out and watched until he made a run for the main trail," Alf Tutter snorted. "But that sorrel the kid was on was too fast for my and Duke's cowponies. We had to wing him or he'd have got home and told what he seen, in case he *had* been down snoopin' around them hidden corrals on Chigger Crick."

"Then you had to stick yore nose into things!" Duke glared at Long Sam. "Alf and me seen a funnel of dust up over the bench in the trail where we winged that blasted Galvin kid. We knowed someone was comin' towards the kid when we shot him, and was afraid to ride on up. We went back down the trail, hid our hosses in a thicket, and sneaked back on foot. You was gettin' up into yore saddle with the younker, and looked right smack towards Alf and me. We know you seen us, Littlejohn."

"But I didn't," Long Sam said grimly.

"I heard you two ride back down the trail and figured yuh'd hightailed for good."

"We'd have jumped you, only there was another dust funnel pokin' up into the sky to the north, and we laid doggo until that derby-hatted, sawed-off hombre yuh say is Joe Fry come along and started nosin' around," Alf Tutter grunted. "Duke and me slipped back to our hosses and started cuttin' across the brush, figgerin' to trail yuh down. But derned if Fry didn't turn yuh right back toward us with rifle lead!"

"What do you two aim to do with me?" Long Sam asked.

"Collect the bounty on yore tough hide!" Alf Tutter said flatly. "Come night, that Galvin kid goes into the Rio Grande. Tomorrer, Duke and me'll take yuh to town, feet first, and collect some scalp money."

Long Sam ground his teeth in rage, but held his tongue. They were riding out into a sort of valley, where the brush grew less densely. Duke Tutter stopped, waving Long Sam to follow suit.

"We ain't much more than a quarter-mile from the ranchhouse, and that's about close enough, Alf," Duke said nervously. "With all them badge men and deputies on the prowl, one of us better ride up and look the place over before we take Littlejohn and the Galvin kid down there, hadn't we?"

"Good idee," Alf Tutter nodded. "So shag on down and scout around to see if we've got the wrong kind of unexpected company."

There was a hard grin on Alf Turner's mouth, and a challenging, mocking gleam in his eyes. He obviously expected Duke Tutter to insist on staying behind to guard the prisoners. Long Sam expected the same sort of thing, for Duke Tutter still had that worried, half-scared look in his eyes each time he glanced at Tommy Galvin.

But to Long Sam's surprise Duke grinned, laid his thumb over the hammer of his six-shooter, and nodded agreement. He swayed a little in the saddle, as if the booze he had consumed that day might be hitting him pretty hard. But his ugly, killer eyes were steady enough, Long Sam noted with a sudden sense of alarm.

"Shore, Alf!" Duke laughed coldly. "I'll slope down and look the place over—from behind the brush patches. And any blasted snooper I ketch sight of will wish his mammy had drowned him when he was a baby."

"Come back here, yuh drunken fool!" Alf Tutter roared.

HIS face was white, and his big, knobby hands shook as he lifted bridle reins and sent his horse forward. Duke, who had started to ride away as he talked, spun his horse around and sat regarding his brother owlishly.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Never mind!" Alf gritted. "Just stay here and watch Littlejohn and the Galvin kid. I'll have a look-see around the place myownself."

"Don't buy it, Alf!" Long Sam snapped.

"Buy what?" Alf Tutter looked at him angrily.

"The bill of goods yore coyote brother is sellin' yuh!" Littlejohn snapped. "He shot off his mouth about what he aimed to do to anyone he sighted around yore ranch so's yuh'd be afraid to let him ride down there. Duke wants to stay here while you go to the ranchhouse. And if yuh let him, he'll try his sweatin' best to put a bullet in Tommy Galvin's brain."

"Don't mind that long-shanked noose-dodger's yappin', Alf!" Duke Tutter said harshly. "Snake them guns out of his holsters, though, before yuh leave. I don't want no trouble with him while yuh're gone, so git them guns so's he can't—"

"So I can't keep you from finishin' Tommy Galvin off, eh?" Long Sam cut in harshly. "Duke, I know that yuh're afraid of somethin' Tommy Galvin knows. Alf savvies that, too."

Duke Tutter got about as white as his murky skin could get, and started cursing Long Sam Littlejohn in a whining, rage-choked voice.

"Shut up, Duke!" Alf Tutter roared.

Duke quit cursing Long Sam and sat glaring around like a vicious animal suddenly brought to bay.

"Now start makin' a little sense, you lunkhead!" Alf snapped at him. "Littlejohn's right. You are afraid of somethin' this Galvin kid knows!"

"Somethin' like that bank robbery and murder at Los Robles this mornin', eh, Duke?" Long Sam Littlejohn's voice was almost kindly.

The gaunt outlaw eased his feet back until only his toes bore his weight in the

stirrups. His long arms tightened slowly about Tommy Galvin while he sat watching Duke Tutter's face twist and tighten into a mask of rage. Duke Tutter's eyes, Long Sam thought, resembled the glassy, unwinking eyes of a rabid animal.

"Yuh yaller-headed, noose-dodgin' son, I don't savvy yore play!" he rasped at Littlejohn. "If I had caved in the back of Guy Shaw's skull and sloped off with that ten thousand dollars, I'd have told Alf about it, split the money with him. I wouldn't hold out money like that on my own brother, and he knows it!"

"Duke's right, Littlejohn!" Alf Tutter scowled. "He gives me trouble with his wild ways, and I have to watch out that he don't pull some kind of fool stunt that'd have the law on our necks. But Duke wouldn't doublecross me by holdin' back my half of a fat haul like that bank robbery netted some feller. So yuh're either guessin' wild, or else tryin' to stir up trouble 'tween Duke and me, hopin' we'll get into a fight and give you a chance to high-tail."

"Mebbe I'm only guessin' wild, Alf," Long Sam droned the words. "On the other hand, mebbe yuh better ask Duke how he knew the *back* of Guy Shaw's skull was caved in, and how he knows that the bandit got ten thousand dollars out of the bank when even the bank owner can't know how much is missin' until he checks up?"

"By the livin', Duke, you stubbed yore toe!" Alf Tutter began wildly. "Yuh splatter-brained fool, yuh robbed that bank as shore as—"

Alf Tutter's words were suddenly drowned in the wild, screeching howl of rage that came from Duke's twisted lips. Duke threw the spurs to his bay horse, and the six-shooter in his hand spat flame and thunder as he charged Long Sam Littlejohn.

BUT the gaunt outlaw had expected that. Littlejohn had rammed the spurs to Sleeper, then kicked his toes out of the stirrups and rolled out of saddle as the big roan lunged. Long Sam held Tommy Galvin tightly, cushioning the youngster's fall as best he could. They hit the ground and rolled over twice, and to Long Sam's amazement Tommy Galvin was suddenly squirming out of his grasp.

"Watch them two coyotes, Long Sam!" the boy gasped.

Littlejohn whirled over once more, snatched guns from leather as he rolled, and came up with a Colt in each fist, a low, mournful range tune humming through his bared teeth.

Sleeper had lunged into Duke Tutter's mount, momentarily checking Duke's rush. But Duke had his horse swung clear now, and was charging again, six-shooter chopping down to lance flame at Long Sam.

The gaunt outlaw winced when Duke Tutter's slug burned across his neck, then flipped the hammer of his right-hand Colt back and let it drop in a single, fast motion. But just as he was dropping the gun-hammer from beneath his thumb, a slug slashed in quartering from the right, ripping across his middle with the feel of raw flame.

Long Sam lurched from the pain, and knew that his slug had not gone into Duke Tutter's middle as he had meant it to do. But the shot had not missed entirely, for Duke was rearing back in the saddle, a look of sick dread in his glazed eyes. He fell sideward and down, but Long Sam had no time to see what Duke did after he hit the ground.

Another slug came snarling in from a right angle. Long Sam felt the hat jump off his head. He half turned, saw Alf Tutter quitting a horse that had gone spooked from the gun thunder. Alf Tutter's face was savage, his eyes cold and determined as he hit the ground on his feet, took a couple of running steps, then came to a halt on wide planted feet.

"Drop that gun, Alf!" Long Sam yelled. "Drop it, or—"

He broke off, smoky eyes narrowing as he saw Alf Tutter's gun swing towards him. Long Sam let both thumbs skid from knurled gun-hammers, and the double roar of exploding shells came a fraction of a second before Alf Tutter's six-shooter exploded.

Alf's bullet went too high, and the big renegade went staggering backwards in short, quick steps for a full two yards before the strong legs buckled, and his lifeless body tumbled over backwards.

Long Sam Littlejohn turned fast at a sound behind him, then stood gaping for a moment. Tommy Galvin was standing

over Duke Tutter, holding Duke's own pearl gripped six-shooter cocked and slanted down at the moaning, white-faced tough.

Duke Tutter cursed the youngster and tried to rear up. But Duke's right arm kinked over queerly at the shoulder, and suddenly he was clutching at the blood-soaked sleeve, too sick to notice what went on around him.

Long Sam walked up to Tommy Galvin, and said he reckoned Duke Tutter did not need much guarding. Tommy nodded, lowered the hammer on Duke's gun, and pushed the weapon down inside his pants belt. Tommy's face was white, but his eyes were clear as he looked at Long Sam and grinned.

"Gollies, Long Sam, I know now why Dad has always said yuh're not as bad as yuh're painted," the boy said. "Yuh're shore not like these two coyotes yuh just cured of their ornery ways."

"I hope I'm not like this pair was," Littlejohn shrugged. "But peel off that shirt, sprout, and let's get a look at yore hurts. And how long had yuh been awake before yuh let me know?"

"I'd been awake a long time—ever since Duke and Alf Tutter got you 'tween 'em and started ridin' down this way," the boy said simply. "But I was watchin' that Duke feller without openin' my eyes wide, and knew he'd blast us both if he found out I was awake. I had a whackin' lot of money inside my shirt, but Duke must have got it, somehow, after I stopped them two bullets. But if we search him—"

"Here's the dinero yuh're worryin' about, Tommy," Long Sam tapped the bulge inside his shirt. "But let's get after them wounds of yores, then skedaddle before somebody comes to find out what this shootin' was all about. Peel off that shirt, but tell me how yuh got hold of all that dinero, button."

TOMMY peeled off his shirt and undershirt, and Long Sam saw the boy turn a sickly green color when he looked down at the deep, ragged gash along his right side. Littlejohn grabbed Tommy's undershirt, hastily tore it into strips, and went to work quickly.

"Gaze off across the country, Tommy, and don't look down at this wound any more," the outlaw said. "And just keep on thinkin' how mighty lucky you are, young feller."

"All right," Tommy said.

"That slug hit a rib down low in yore back, glanced off the rib, and shore cut a gash in yore hide," Long Sam said. "But it's a clean wound, the rib isn't even broke, and about the worst yuh'll suffer will be settin' on yore hunkers around home until the gash heals up. This hole up in the top of yore left shoulder will be sore for a spell, too. But yuh're a mighty lucky boy, Tommy Galvin."

"Only don't forget that my luck would have petered out mighty fast if you hadn't come along, Long Sam," the youngster said gravely.

"Speakin' of somebody comin' along, that Joe Fry pest will be doin' just that," Long Sam sighed. "He walked in on me at a little crossroads store back yonder in the hills early this mornin'. I went in to buy grub and tobacco, but all I got was a bullet hole through this off leg of mine when I spotted Fry comin' in the front door and made a run for the back door.

"Fry's been hot on my trail all day, so hustle into this shirt, button, while I get Duke Tutter up in a saddle. We'll try to get to yore daddy's place without hubbin' into any of the posses that are on the prowl."

"Don't worry about posses, Long Sam!" Tommy said quickly. "I know every pig trail in these thickets, and we'll shore get to the Circle G without anybody seein' us. And won't Mom and Dad get a surprise when I tell'em how you sided me in a tight, and fixed these two Tutter coyotes so's they'll not ever rustle any more Circle G beefs!"

"Uh-huh, I reckon the Tutters won't bother yore folks any more," Littlejohn nodded. "But how'd yuh get hold of that bank loot, Tommy?"

"Why, I was ridin' to town for the mail this mornin' and saw this Duke Tutter scootin' up the trail on a played-out hoss," Tommy said simply. "Duke was lookin' back over his shoulder like a scared coyote, so I knew he'd been up to somethin' that had somebody after him. He ducked off into the brush at the head of Chigger Creek, so I poked along after him to see where he aimed to hole up, in case the law was after him."

"If Duke had seen yuh he'd have shot

yuh!" Littlejohn scowled. "But go on, Tommy."

"Duke stopped at Apache Spring at the head of Chigger Creek," Tommy resumed. "That bay hoss, there, was staked out at the spring, and Duke changed mounts in a hurry. Then he took somethin' out of a saddle pocket, and I seen that it was a canvas sack. He lifted up a big rock, put the sack under the rock, and lit out of there on the bay, hazin' the wore-out hoss ahead of him. I slipped down to the spring and lifted up that rock, and when I seen the Los Robles bank's name on the canvas sack, I got so flabbergasted I dropped the big rock I was holdin' up."

"And Duke heard that rock fall!" Long Sam groaned.

"I reckon so," Tommy nodded. "Anyhow he came buzzin' back, jerkin' his gun out the minute he spotted me. I high tailed into the thicket where I'd left my hoss, and Duke sure singed the air around me with bullets. When I looked in the sack and saw all that money, I knew Duke must have stole it."

"Didn't you know Duke and Alf were both watchin' for you to come out of the thicket and make a run for it," Long Sam asked.

"No," Tommy said soberly. "I heard Alf come up to the spring and ask Duke what the trouble was. They fussed a while, then got on their horses and rode off. But the minute I popped out of the brush they was both right after me. My sorrel Streak hoss outrun their plugs fair and square. Only they shot me out of the saddle, didn't they?"

"They did," Long Sam said grimly. "But shake a hoof, younker, or Joe Fry will be tryin' to give me a dose of the same. Borrow Alf Tutter's hoss, since he won't be needin' it. I've got this Duke cuss roped to the saddle, so lead out, Tommy, and let's find them pig trails you were talkin' about."

Next Month's Featured Headliners!

JIM HATFIELD rides again in THE VANISHING VAQUEROS, a novel of six-gun action by Jackson Cole that brings you the Lone Wolf Ranger at top form. When men disappear into oblivion in the Land of No Return, Hatfield battles to pierce a grim mystery—and is plunged into a series of exciting, fantastic adventures involving a fabulous treasure deep in the heart of the badlands! THE VANISHING VAQUEROS is a "must" for all Jim Hatfield fans!

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TAKE a traveling snake-oil salesman, an antique six-shooter and Doc Swap's bossy spinster sister Ursula, scramble 'em together and you have DOC SWAP TURNS A TRICK, by Ben Frank, one of the cleverest stories of the tradin' hombre to date. It's scheduled to bring you some good hearty laughter in our next month's issue.

* * * * *

AN EPIDEMIC and three bandits aren't enough to keep Long Sam Littlejohn from doing folks a service in LONG SAM'S MERCY MISSION, by Lee Bond, a deeply appealing story about a kind-hearted outlaw's determination to save lives—even at the possible cost of his own.

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IN ADDITION to the foregoing, there will be other smashing yarns in the next issue—plus another Frontier Post chat with Captain Starr. Be on hand for a feast of good reading dished up by the West's finest story wranglers!

Colonel Stainhugh personally shot Chief Tomas from close quarters

COLONEL UNUM'S RAID

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

New commandant Colonel Peyton Stainhugh was sure a stickler for military punctilio and pomp—until the crucial moment!

WHEN THE TROOPER knocked respectfully on the adobe door, the lieutenant didn't move from his long-legged sprawl on the hard chair. He looked and saw it was Corporal Casey. It was going to be a hot day, which was nothing out of the usual for Fort Call, midway between Tucson and Gila Bend. Casey's tanned face was dripping.

"This Arizona country is good training for hades," Lieutenant Mullen thought. He cleared his throat to speak. "Yes, Casey?"

"A column of dust in the distance, Lieutenant," the raw-boned redhead reported. "It's them without doubt, sor. Shall we turn out the guard in style?"

Jeptha "Reb" Mullen winced at the very thought. From the little he had heard, Colonel Peyton Stainhugh, the new Tucson military district commandant, was

a stickler for all the punctilio and pomp of which the U. S. Army was capable, and which was demanded in *Cavalry Regulations.*

A graduate of West Point, Reb Mullen knew what was expected. But as commander of this small outpost, with a strangely assorted personnel, Reb couldn't imagine what a really formal turnout would be. But he could vision a reception, and the vision was anything but soothing.

He thought of the variegated miners, ranchers, trappers, and traders who had flocked to the questionable protection of this advance observation post. They outnumbered the well-trained band of mostly Irish troopers of the Fifth U. S. Cavalry which Reb Mullen commanded.

His military-ordered mind suggested that Special Order Thirty-one might serve to protect him somewhat from the wrath of a drill-conscious spit-and-polish officer, if things did not go right.

He regretted sending out sixteen of his seasoned troopers on an early scout, even if he realized he could have done nothing other than send them out.

APACHE Chief Tomas was on the warpath. Tucson and Gila Bend wanted Tomas and his followers captured and sent to either of the well-prepared bases of reception, where soldiers would take proper care of the rampant Indian and his scourging band. Fort Call had only been established for scouting and flanking purposes for the two larger posts.

There it was! Patrols must be maintained.

This left at the fort a mere corporal's guard of regulars and a motley band of ruggedly individualistic Westerners. The latter, by Special Order Thirty-one, had been dragooned into service for what the Tucson army headquarters deemed a very good reason.

The bald fact of the matter was that these ruggedly individualistic frontiersmen, who had been driven into the sanctuary of the army posts by Tomas, had their own ideas as to how things should be run. These ideas were based on earnest and intermittent warfare with the Apaches of Arizona.

The balder fact of the matter was that these scouts, trappers, traders, and miners had no reluctance in instructing the military, and what was worse, in suggesting to the military an even hotter spot than Arizona to which the military could go, if the officers disagreed.

So an order had come out, authorizing post commanders to swear in these argumentative, if colorful, men as cavalrymen for the duration of the Tomas threat. Or until competent military jurisdiction dispensed with their services.

That, Headquarters suspected, would fix their hash for them! They were subject to military law! There would be no further arguments or trouble from them.

But from Reb's close contacts with some of the men—with "Gila Joe," "Indian Pete," "Tolerable Tim" Gunn, "Pima" Jones, and others—the lieutenant had wondered if everything would be all right.

When word came by currier that Colonel Peyton Stainhugh, the new district commander, was starting a tour of inspection, Reb Mullen had shuddered deep in his Kentucky heart. He could predict Dill Carsted's unholy joy over the event.

Reb and Dill were officers of the same troop. They had been classmates at the Military Academy. But by common consent, the lank, blond Reb and the tall, sturdy Carsted kept in contact with each other only through army orders.

It had been Dill Carsted who pinned on the gray-eyed, wide-mouthed, lanky son of General Gibbs Mullen, C. S. A., the nickname of Reb. It was in jeering tribute to the fact that the elder Mullen had been a brigade commander in the forces of the Confederate States Army during the decade-dead Civil War. And the nickname had stuck.

It had been Reb Mullen who pinned the nickname of "Pickle" on Carsted, both for his usual sourness and his Christian cognomen of Dill. But it hadn't stuck. Not so far.

Dill had about him too much that smacked of headquarters savvy. He was slated for employment in Washington, where his father was a potent Assistant in the War Department. President Grant was serving his second term.

All this passed swiftly through Reb Mullen's mind as he sat taking what ease he could in the mounting heat of the sun-struck Arizona afternoon. Casey stirred in the doorway, shifting his huge boot-shod feet and scratching at the gray army shirt

he wore above his blue trooper pants.

"The guard, sor?" the powerful Irishman reminded the lieutenant.

"Turn it out, of course, Corporal," Reb murmured. "You'd better stay with me. Is there a regular on the entry post?"

"No, sor. None available. Regan is working on the horses that have to be shod. Lonney an' Peters an' Ghormley are on the water detail, bringing water in from the spring. Mulligan is on sick call, as usual when he ain't fighting or drinking. I'd like to bat the jug ears off of him, would you permit it."

"Not that," Reb said, his eyes distant. He scratched his fighting jaw reflectively. "Not until after the new commandant leaves, Casey."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Who is on Post One, Casey?" Reb pursued.

"The one you call Tolerable Tim, sor. Tim Gunn."

REB groaned and climbed to his feet. "Well, we better leave Tolerable Tim where he is. That way, he has only the one chance to run afoul of Colonel Stainhugh. After all, Tim has only to challenge the visiting detail and then yell for you. You drilled him thoroughly in the duties of Post One?"

"Yes, sor. But it's like passing the time of day with a mule. You know how he is. An' most of the rest are the same way, to boot. That's all, sor."

Casey saluted sharply. When Reb returned the salute, the corporal backed two paces, wheeled precisely on his heel, and stamped away.

"That's all," Reb repeated as he reached for his saber and holster belt on a wall peg. "I hope that's all!"

He inspected his polished boots and his creased trousers, held rigid by under-arch straps. He smoothed the sleeves of his gray shirt and hiked the knot of his yellow scarf exactly to the front. He slapped a wide-brimmed hat on his head, then defiantly gave it a more-than-usual rakish tilt. He tugged at the wispy ends of his blond, trying-to-be-sweeping mustache, which style was being favored by Indian fighters.

He decided he would pass inspection even at a much more formal post than Fort Call.

"Casey said a column of dust was visible," he mused. "That means they're still ten or twelve miles away."

He cupped a drink of tepid, chlorinated water from the canvas bag that hung at one side of his tiny room. He wished he'd left the bag hanging longer in the sun, so that evaporation would have made the water more coldly palatable.

"Well, we'll probably have some cards tonight, if a decent detail of officers and men are accompanying the boss. I'm tired of two-handed draw poker with 'Kibby' Nayser."

Second Lieutenant Nayser was out with the scouting detail, which was just as well. He was a good scouting officer, but a poor parade-ground specimen. Too chubby and merry.

Reb thought about the way that he'd had to distribute available uniforms so that each of the new recruits would have a piece of army gear to wear, if not a proper and whole uniform. He guessed that maybe Stainhugh wouldn't like that.

"I'm imagining things," he said aloud. "We'll be all right."

He was just as glad that Dill Carsted wasn't here to snicker and chuckle at his discomfiture.

Reb left his quarters to make ready to receive the colonel.

The column was still a few miles off, riding in split formation to escort a mule-drawn ambulance. The sun glinted on a bugle that sounded a faraway call.

"What the devil!" Reb exclaimed. "Is the boss traveling like a woman? He certainly hasn't any females with him, I hope!"

Reb walked over to the fort gate, where his men were drawn up.

He waited, resignation showing in his fine features as he watched the approaching column. The guidon was snapping smartly in the hot desert gusts, and a fine cloud of alkali dust was rising up in the wake of the horses.

Just when the approaching troops were at the right distance, Reb slanted a last quick look around at his new recruits and murmured—

"All right, Tolerable Tim."

Tolerable Tim Gunn chomped his discolored fangs down in a final chew on his wad of tobacco, wiped some stain from his walrus mustache, slapped the upturned

brim of his hat back out of his pale blue eyes, and roared at the approaching detail—

"Who's thar!" Then he said in an aside that was clear to all—"A danged fool bit o' business, askin' who is thar when we know danged well who is thar, an' wud be shootin' if'n we didn't!"

"Silence!" Reb cautioned the snickering others.

"Visiting district commandant and detail," a precise voice from the visitors called back.

The speaker wore no gold bars on his epaulettes, so he was a second lieutenant. His raised glove halted the oncoming visitors. But this was just the beginning of formalities that must be strictly followed, no matter how foolish they appeared.

"Well, I done that tol'able well," Tim Gunn drawled to Reb, thinking his duties as a sentry at the sentry post were over.

"You haven't told them to halt yet," Reb advised. "Then call for the Corporal of the Guard in the fort."

"They is a-halted, Looey," Tim Gunn protested. "An' our Corporal Casey is standin' right alongside of you."

At that moment Corporal Casey came to Reb's rescue. As if he were the sentry who had challenged the colonel's detail, Casey called—

"Halt your detail." Then, turning about, Casey shouted toward the fort—"Corporal of the Guar-r-rd! Post Number One!" Then, assuming the personality of another person—that of the Corporal of the Guard—Casey walked forward and ordered the second lieutenant of the visiting detail—"Advance and be recognized."

IMMEDIATELY the young second lieutenant of the detail rode up, his gloved hand still raised to keep the detail back. At Casey's orders, he gave the countersign—"Peaceful territory." Then, as Corporal Casey stepped aside, the second lieutenant lowered his gloved hand, and the entire detail of visitors started into the fort.

Then Reb Mullen saw his new colonel. He was a broiled red, stiff-mustached, severely uniformed man. And beside the colonel rode a hard-faced, hard-eyed young man wearing shoulder bars. It was Dill Carsted!

Corporal Casey and Tolerable Tim Gunn presented arms as the detail passed. Reb hoped against hope that Colonel Stainhugh would salute, which would signify that the visiting dignitary would dispense with the formal army horror known as "the inspection of the guard."

Instead Stainhugh drew up his detail as he rode to the fore. Casey immediately slapped his carbine back to the port position in the manual of arms.

"Turn out the guar-r-rd!" Casey called in accordance with formality. "Visiting district officer!"

Reb swallowed hard. His guard was a motley squad of assorted frontiersmen, each wearing some part of a uniform as a badge of army identity.

Indian Pete wore a cavalry hat above buckskin trappings. Gila Joe was in dirty levis, a torn undershirt, a sombrero, but he wore army boots and spurs. Pima Jones was in army trousers, moccasins, a red shirt with the tails hanging outside his knife-belt, and a red band of cotton for headgear. Tolerable Tim wore Mexican trousers, army shirt, high skin boots, and an upturned felt hat. There were four desert rats in the lot.

The only thing they all had in common was army carbines.

Reb paced out smartly to meet Colonel Stainhugh, Casey falling in behind the lieutenant.

"The guard is ready for inspection, Sir," Reb reported, snapping his hand to a smart salute.

"Well, drat my eyes!" Stainhugh spluttered, so that all heard. "You call this rabble an Army Guard Detail?" His keen eyes brushed them off swiftly. "What are these men, Lieutenant?"

"Special Order Thirty-one, Sir," Reb managed to say. "Tucson Headquarters ordered. 'All male native Americans on hand at your post for purposes of protection, shall be sworn in as members of the armed forces of the United States, for the period of the emergency in the Territory'."

"I am fairly conversant with my own orders," Stainhugh said dryly. "I specified also, Lieutenant—er—"

"Mullen, Sir," Reb supplied his name, holding himself at attention. "Jeptha Mullen, Third Company, Fifth Cavalry, Sir."

"I specified also, Mr. Mullen, that they should be in uniform."

"The district commandant's orders have been carried out, Sir. The insufficient uniforms have been distributed so that each recruit-trooper shall have identification in some measure from the so-called friendly Indians, who have also thrown themselves upon us for protection. Otherwise, I have no excuse, Sir!"

"I agree with the latter," the colonel said.

His glance touched again on Tolerable Tim, who at that moment was not standing at attention. He had rested the barrel of his carbine between his crossed ankles while he carved out a fresh chew of tobacco.

"Look at that man," the new commandant complained. "Look at him! Is that character one of our Indian fighters?'

Tolerable Tim looked up to find the lobster-faced Stainhugh glaring at him. Hard lines drew the frontiersman's eyes to a pale blue slash in his sun-blackened face.

"Who, me?" he asked, jamming his knife into its case. "Me?" He spit a stream out. "Look at yourself, yuh ol' hoss, if'n yuh'd like to have a real laugh. Yuh better crawl back in thet thar ambulance an' lie down afore yuh bust a blood vessel. If'n yuh don't like my looks, go frighten a mule with yore boiled face. Me, I come here to scout an' to fight an' to help, an' not to take a lot of sand-drift from the likes of you. Watch yore lip, ol' hoss, or yuh kin go whistle in Tomas's teepee fer a scout."

"Hold it, Tolerable; hold it!" Reb cried. "Fer you, Reb, I will," Tolerable Tim said. "But yuh tell that flag-faced army bobcat to hold his tongue off'n me. I hope to go to perdition with an Apache war-whoop if I ain't the most free man in this here Territory. One more snort out of him an' he can go scout hisself, for my poke."

STAINHUGH blinked in disbelief. Then he scanned the hard, sober faces of the rest of Fort Call's guard of former civilians. What he saw there was their complete agreement with the coarse sentiments expressd by Tolerable Tim Gunn.

"Never mind the guard!" the colonel roared belatedly, snapping his head around to see who was strangling a guffaw in the ranks of his own detail. "Arrest this man." He pointed at Tim Gunn.

Reb saw two gaily ribboned poke-bonnets emerge from the rear of the ambulance wagon. It was as he feared. There were ladies present. But he didn't have time to ponder that further.

A horseman spurred up from close to Stainhugh and put his hand out for Tolerable Tim's carbine.

"Your piece, my man!" the rider snapped.

It was Bill Carsted.

Reb pushed forward, grim-faced. He positioned himself between the two.

"I'm in charge of this guard," Reb said, hard-voiced. "I'll give the orders here, Mister."

"Fall back, Carsted," Stainhugh snapped.

"Yes, Sir," the punctilious young officer answered. He chuckled at Reb and added, "You're in charge here, Reb. For just now." And he dropped back.

Stainhugh's eyes swiveled back to Reb at Dill's mention of the jeering nickname. He was waiting. Reb swung to Tim Gunn.

"I'll have to have your carbine, Tolerable. The colonel says you are under arrest, as you heard."

Tolerable looked as if he were about to take them all on. A hand dropped to his knife. The other grabbed up the cavalry rifle. But after holding Reb's eyes for a moment, Tolerable Tim smiled a bit sheepishly.

"Fer you, Looey," Tolerable said, "I will, but yuh tell that red-faced polecat that I scouted fer General Grant when he was in New Mexico an' only a pup of an officer. Tell him that just because I don't go struttin' through the desert like a overdressed Pima squaw an' with a covey of sojers to protect me, that don't mean I ain't a man, and a gosh-for-certain free one, too. Hade's bells in the morning! He must be E. Pluribus Unum in the flesh! Ol' Cunnel Unum himself!"

He glared at Stainhugh and went on. "Get this, too, yuh lamp-faced sojer. If I ain't un-arrested quick, yuh're in for some hard times when it comes to trackin' after Tomas. Dang my good eyes if yuh ain't! Now, Reb, where is the jail-house? Trader Gillson's, I hope. He's got a powerful good supply of whisky."

Stainhugh's face was raging as he rode stiffly past Reb.

Dill was grinning broadly and derisively.

As the ambulance passed, Reb had it in him to blink his eyes and snap a salute to the two ladies who looked out at him with interest. They were quite alike. They were pretty, modishly gowned with puffed shoulder effects and generous skirts, and they held fancy new sunshades—frilled hoops of material on slender canelike handles. Obviously, they were mother and daughter.

The younger of the two women leaned on her sunshade to look at Reb intently, swiftly sizing him up. Before the wagon swung them out of sight, she waved a fluffy handkerchief at him briefly.

"Colonel's squaw and papoose," Indian Pete said, already informed of things by the Indian grapevine. The half-breed grinned at Reb. "You rub noses with her by light of moon, yes?"

"Shut up, you idiot," Reb snapped. "I'm here to fight, not to spark young ladies."

"Both be good to do," Pete assured him gravely. "You bet that the other young, tall officer, who laugh at you, spark young squaw."

Reb walked away without answering, but he would have bet on that, too, if Dill could swing it. Thinking about the girl's golden beauty and her snapping dark eyes, Reb didn't know that he blamed Dill much.

But inwardly, he was cursing Colonel Stainhugh for bringing ladies to such a vulnerable post as Fort Call.

THAT evening, however, Reb wondered if he had not been over-estimating the dangers confronting his Border fort. The officers and ladies sat about a huge fire built by the post Indians, and they watched goat meat roasting on spits. They ate fried potatoes and guavas, and drank syrup-thick coffee.

The visiting troopers had bivouacked in the lee of the permanent barracks, from where the fresh night breeze carried their lilting tunes as the men sang.

Stainhugh—Colonel "Unum," as Tolerable Tim persisted in calling the doughty man—had mellowed under Mrs. Stainhugh's gentle raillery and generally amusing observations.

Dill Carsted enlivened proceedings with his mouth organ, on which he showed a pleasing proficiency.

Just one passage brought tension to the group. That was when Stainhugh asked, caustically, why Reb had not requisitioned uniforms to go around.

"Something happened to the supply train that was sent out with our supplies," Reb tried to pass it off. "It got turned back."

"Tomas attacked the train twenty miles out of Tucson," Dill put in at that juncture. "It was forced to turn back."

"Tomas hasn't been east of Call since it was set up," Reb protested. "I don't doubt some Indians showed. But it wasn't Tomas. Had it been, the cadet-fresh officer in charge of the train wouldn't have got back to Tucson. Any time Tomas shows at or near Tucson, it will be because we have been wiped out here. Tomas doesn't like to be flanked."

Anger crept into Dill Carsted's voice as he snapped—

"For your information, Sir, the 'cadet-fresh' officer you refer to was I. It was impossible to get through with the woolens and cottons and leathers you had asked for."

Reb made a smiling bow to the ladies.

"We are grateful," he told Dill, "that you were more successful in freighting the calico through. Though I question how safe it is."

"Nonsense!" Dill blurted. "You're just trying to make your lookout post appear more dangerous than it is. There is no danger between here and Tucson."

Reb canted his head around, a slight grin on his mouth. But he didn't say anything, even when a flush of recollection stained Dill's cheeks heavily in the firelight.

The colonel looked up from an avid interest in his succulent goat.

"Doesn't quite hang together, Dill, does it?" Stainhugh said. "It was too dangerous to make it with supplies, but perfectly all right for the ladies to come. Maybe things have changed, eh?" He swung his eyes back to Reb. "That uncouth character who was so insulting at Post One today? Do you really set so much store by his worth as a scout?"

Reb was deadly earnest. "Sir, Tolerable Tim is worth a troop of men. Not only as a scout but because he has such influence with the friendly Indians we have here.

These friendly Indians we permit to stay about the post in daylight and to camp outside the stockade at night. They have known Tolerable Tim for a long time. He can do things with them that no other man can. I need Tim Gunn."

"Rats," Dill said flatly, his eyes still angry from the mild rebuke Stainhugh had given him. "He's a badly disciplined desert nomad. Jail will do him good. Besides, it would be a bad example to the other men to turn him free. It would make us appear weak. Keep him under arrest until he is court-martialed. Bear down on the friendly Indians and show them we are bosses, not men of Tim Gunn's stamp."

Colonel Stainhugh nodded.

"I see Mr. Mullen's point, but he should see ours. His wishes are dictated by a desire to do for the immediate moment. Ours, as expressed by Mr. Carsted, for the overall policy. I'm afraid your Tolerable Tim, as you call him Mr. Mullen, will have to languish under military arrest and face a court."

Dill grinned his triumph, his teeth a white line across his face in the leaping firelight. From nearby came the hourly call from Post Number One.

"Post Number One—nine o'clock—all is well."

The call was picked up by Post Two, went to Post Three, and so on, until the cry came faintly but intelligibly from Post Eight down by the ravine.

"Pos' Eight—ha' pass four o'clock—gimme fi' cents."

The ladies giggled. Reb blushed.

"One of my half-breeds. But I'm afraid the fraction is not justified. He's really seven-eights Indian. He's doing his best to imitate the calls of the other sentries, but he doesn't know much English. Remember, Sir, most of my regulars are out on patrol."

COLONEL Stainhugh growled something, then went on wolfing his roasted-brown goat meat. But there was a chuckle underlying his growl, and a glint in his eye.

"A most interesting sentry report," he said. He shook his head. "Most interesting. 'Gimme fi' cents.' Don't know but that is an accurate picture of life in this country. About all this world is worth—five cents." He looked about him. "Well, ladies, shall we retire?"

"Mr. Carsted promised to show me the night scenes by moonlight, Papa," Mary Stainhugh said.

Dill cleared his throat importantly and jumped to his feet to offer the girl his arm. She hesitated a moment.

"And I think I'd better ask Mr. Mullen along to show Mr. Carsted anything of interest Mr. Carsted might not know," Mary Stainhugh added.

With a grin, Reb came to his feet. The three walked slowly away, with the permission of the Stainhugh parents.

After they were gone, the colonel spoke.

"Think he's any kin to Gibbs Mullen, Cora?" he asked. "I noted that Dill called him Reb."

"Naturally," Cora Stainhugh answered her husband. "Didn't you see those level gray eyes?"

"Always did think I just beat Gibbs out at The Point," Peyton Stainhugh said. "Poor Gibbs. It must break his heart to be banned from the army because he was a Southern leader."

"I imagine there are worse things," Mrs. Stainhugh murmured as she walked to her quarters, leaving her husband to stare after her.

And so passed the first day for the Stainhugh's at Fort Call.

Reb Mullen came awake with an uproar dinning in his ears. There were the flat smack of army carbines; the brassy, frantic blasts of the bugler's summons to arms; the wild yells of attacking Indians, and the roaring voice of Corporal Casey.

"Roll out, you tarriers!" Casey was howling. "Come a-shootin'! The red devils are on us!"

Reb struggled into his pants and boots, slapped his gun belt around his flat midriff, snatched his saber, and sprinted out. He nearly knocked down a befuddled Stainhugh as the latter emerged, bleareyed in the light of the flares, from his adobe quarters.

"Get out of my way!" Reb roared at first contact with the stocky figure. "Sir!" he threw back over his shoulder, as he made out who the man was. "Casey! Casey! Form the men in a protecting ring about the walls! No attack is to be made to the outside under any circumstances! Not before daylight do we pursue!"

The corporal appeared before him.

"Done, Sir," Casey snapped, and trotted off, bawling out the orders.

In a twinkling, the stockade walls were manned by half-clad troopers and by the recently sworn-in recruits. Lines of flame studded the night as the seasoned frontiersmen waited calmly for targets to be outlined against the pale night sky, then fired.

Dill Carsted took charge of his own detail from Tucson.

In five minutes the firing from outside was dwindling. Then silence came over the fort again as suddenly as it had been broken. Silence except for the moaning of the wounded.

The surgeon was on duty with the scouting detail, so Reb pressed the wound-wise prisoner, Tolerable Tim, into service to do what he could. Mary Stainhugh came close to Reb, her eyes wide. She stilled the trembling of her lips to offer her aid.

"May I help, please, Reb?"

"It's dirty business. I'm afraid you'd be made ill, Mary."

"I'm a soldier's daughter," the girl reminded him. "Even though you may not think so, my father is a soldier. Just because he isn't so young any longer—"

Reb grinned.

"Good girl." he said. "Go ahead, if you can stand it. We can use you, goodness knows. Hey, Tolerable! Miss Stainhugh will help you."

"Wal, bust my eyes if'n they ain't put trousers on the wrong member of the family," Tolerable drawled. "Come along, Miss Unum, ma'am. Leave E. Pluribus to puff an' bawl. You an' me will patch the boys up."

Mary Stainhugh slapped Tolerable Tim resoundingly on both cheeks. The old scout threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Yuh'll do, yuh'll do!" he chuckled. "I like gumption. Come along, Miss Unum."

ONE DEAD and four wounded was the toll that the rampaging Indians had exacted in their stealthy raid. Dill ordered his men to horse. He was for riding in pursuit when Reb protested.

"I'm in charge here, Dill," he said. "I know you want to go after them. And that's just what they want you to do. Then they'll either sneak back here and finish up the job, or they will ambush you and wipe your detail out."

"Stand away from my horse!" Dill shouted. "This is my detail!"

Reb calmly walked away. He issued orders to his men to man Post Number One and prevent any incoming or outgoing parties from passing. Dill Carsted raged. He was inclined to make his try.

Stainhugh called him to order.

"Grow up, Carsted," the colonel snapped. "This is no time for heroics. Mr. Mullen is right. But at the first rays of daylight, we shall pursue. Mullen, how many men can we field?"

"With or without Tolerable?" Reb asked.

"What has he to do with it? He's just one man, isn't he?"

"No, Sir," Reb told him. "Tolerable Tim can talk half the friendly Indians into going. And only he can do it. They like him, they trust him. They also know he is a good scout and can read the signs. With Tolerable freed and able to lead us as a scout, we can field fifty good Indian braves against Tomas."

"Hmmm," Stainhugh mused. "You think it was Tomas?"

"I know it was," Reb replied. "Tim Gunn says one of the enemy dead is Tomas' lieutenant. Also, one of the Indian captives said Tomas thought we had no strength with the main detail out. He didn't know of your detail, Sir.

"We have a good chance to track him down come daylight," Reb continued. "The captured brave reports they rode a great distance. Their mounts are tired. Also, we have an idea they are not so strong in numbers, having counted on a small detachment here to deal with."

"See how many men Tolerable can persuade the Indians to field with us," Stainhugh ordered. "Also, get me an interpreter so that I can check for myself what he says to them, and what they say to him."

"Yes, Sir," Reb said, and he hurried away.

Ten minutes later, he stood behind Stainhugh and Stainhugh's half-breed interpreter, Indian Pete, and heard the powwow. Tolerable Tim spoke as follows—

"O, brother good men, it is asked of you that you aid us in overcoming the foul Tomas, stealer of horses and squaws, and killer of children and old men. We ask you to ride with us."

No answer to this from the stolid-faced Apache braves. Tolerable Tim carried it on—

"You have all seen this strutting, rooster-like paleface of the two squaws, who came to us yesterday. You think him to be another ol' hoss-faced military man only. Ah, how mistaken you are, my brothers. Do you know who this is, this rooster with the boiled-red face?"

No answer, except a strangling sound from Colonel Stainhugh. Tolerable Tim spoke on—

"This is E. Pluribus Unum himself! Look you at your coins, with which you buy so many valuables, so much whisky, so much of tobacco. Look you, and you will read E. PLURIBUS UNUM. It is this man, the strutting Colonel Unum, who has issued you those coins. It is this man, Colonel Unum, who can take away the power that they bring you. If I lead you, if my friends go, too, and if the noble officer Mullen rides, will you not accompany me on the trail of the foul killer Tomas?"

The braves would, and they said so with grunting and nodding and a bustling around to get their mounts ready on the picket line.

Reb kept strictly away from Stainhugh until the sun broke over the mountains in the east. The parade ground—a postage-stamp replica of real parade grounds—was peopled with the horses of the troopers, the frontiersmen, and the braves. Then he came forward.

"Prepare to mount!"

When the creaking of leather and the rattle of arms stilled, Reb turned about-face and saluted the colonel.

"The troops are ready, Sir."

"Mount!" Stainhugh bawled. "Right by fours. March!"

The pursuing detachment clattered off, out Post One, and along the way of Apache Tomas.

TOMAS had made a bad mistake. He had calculated on wiping out the small Fort Call detachment and stealing fresh horses and supplies. But now, with his surprise attack beaten off, he had pushed as far from the scene of conflict as he could without rest. He led his men to an Apache's favorite stopping and fighting place—the heights.

Cunningly, he sent ahead a sacrificial few of his braves and a large number of horses to throw any pursuers off his trail. It might have worked against less keen trackers than Tolerable Tim and Reb Mullen.

Tolerable had seen the telltale sign that marked the division of the rampaging Indians. Reb had shrewdly read Tomas' tactics out of the welter of hoof and footprints.

"We've got them trapped high up on Mount Eagle," Reb said in the ensuing conference. "We should attack in force at the best-protected point for us. Failing to take it, we should then lay siege until Tomas is starved out." He flushed and looked up at Colonel Stainhugh. "Your pardon, Sir. I'm used to being in charge alone."

"I don't think the trust has been misplaced, Lieutenant," Stainhugh said. "Organize your troops for the fight."

And a fight it was, with Tolerable leading half the detachment up one slope, while Stainhugh, Reb, and Dill stormed over the top with a savage raking of the Indian fighters with their flat-smacking, deadly carbines.

Stainhugh had his hat shot off and a sleeve pierced by an arrow in the final rush. He personally shot Tomas from close quarters with his pistol when the fanatical Apache chief tried to brain the Civil War hero.

Tolerable Tim, arriving in time to see this bit of heroism, blinked and spat a line of juice.

"Dang my popping eyes if'n you ain't a she panther-cat at that, boss! That was good."

"Hmmm," Stainhugh growled, his eyes twinkling. "So you think Colonel Unum is some good, after all, eh?"

"Tol'able," Tolerable Tim admitted.

"We salivated a lot of Indians," Stainhugh observed, looking at the carnage. "A lot, eh, Tim?"

"Tol'able lot."

"I'm thirsty, Tim," Stainhugh grunted, "Are you?"

"Tol'able thirsty."

"How'd you like a nice long cool whisky-and-lemon, Tim?" Stainhugh asked. "It would be at my headquarters?"

"Gee-ho-se-phat!" Tolerable Tim exploded. "Now you are a-warblin,' Colonel Unum! But why at Tucson?"

"Oh," Stainhugh chuckled, "it isn't every commandant who celebrates his report to a station by establishing peace at once with a brilliant raid. And I'm of a mind to get me a new head scout, a chief scout for the district. Would you like the job?"

"Tol'able." Tim Gunn replied, grinning hugely.

They were clanking along the trail to Fort Call with their prisoners and with the captured booty when Stainhugh looked at Reb.

"Did you serve in the Civil War, Mullen? I heard Mr. Carsted calling you Reb."

"No, Sir. Too young, Sir."

"What side would you have served on, Mullen?"

"I'm from Kentucky, Sir," Reb said simply.

Dill, looking slightly worried, peered. "He's a rebel, Colonel. All Kentuckians are at heart."

Stainhugh glared.

"Are you aware, Carsted, that Kentucky is my home state?"

When Dill had faded abruptly back in the line, Stainhugh asked Reb gently, "Is Gibbs Mullen your father?"

"Yes, Sir," Reb answered proudly, his eyes steady. "And a good cavalry officer, too, Sir. He is—uh—retired, Sir."

Colonel "Unum" Stainhugh smiled gently.

"I don't think the family record will suffer any, son." He slanted his eyes around. "Carsted? I seem to recall that you were outlining how you thought Fort Call should be run. On the way out here."

"Yes, Sir; a bit, Sir," Dill answered eagerly, spurring up close again. "Of course, now that Tomas is dead—"

"I think I'm going to let you try your hand at Fort Call," Stainhugh's voice overrode him. "I think, myself, it's been very well handled, and it will be interesting to see what improvements you can effect."

"With Reb there, too, Sir?" Dill asked.

"No. Mr. Mullen will be coming back to Tucson with me. Well, Mr. Carsted, where is your eagerness? Don't you see the fort, there ahead of us? Have your bugler sound Attention."

Dill strangled on whatever he had it in him to say. The column came to attention with a rattle of sabers and of spurs when the light, high notes sang sweetly into the air.

Colonel "Unum's" raid was history. Another chapter had been written in the book of progress in pushing forward the frontier.

"A tol'ably successful raid," Stainhugh murmured, a grin coming over his face. His eyes took in the easy grace of the young Reb Mullen erect in the saddle beside him, and he squared his shoulders. "Tol'ably successful!"

RANGER JIM HATFIELD AT HIS BATTLING BEST IN

THE VANISHING VAQUEROS

By JACKSON COLE

NEXT ISSUE'S EXCITING COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL!

"Watchin' everything," came the answer from the door, and Lenny turned his head to stare into the baleful eyes of Joe Rale, Rellet's friend

THE FULL PRICE

By JOE GREGG

When Dib Rellet and his gang jump Lenny May's mine, Chief Bright Eagle mixes into the game—and proves his loyalty!

LENNY MAY walked the patient little burro through the narrow file and into the heavily treed park that shelfed out from the mountainside mine that he was working with Bright Eagle, the ancient Ogallala Indian.

It occurred to him again what an ideal screen this natural park made for anyone interested in what progress Lenny May and Bright Eagle were making. Remembering the disgruntled and hard mob of men bitten by the gold-bug who were currently collecting in and around the small settlement of Medicine Pipe, a few miles in the lee of the mountain, Lenny compressed his lips.

"There must be somebody interested," he reasoned.

When the gold-rush had started, Government men had warned against adventurers flooding the region. For two reasons:

"The re-located Indians cannot be lawfully forced out of these lands; and, further, the gold is not sufficient to be termed a true strike, and is likely to peter out under intensive mining."

The first part of the warning was brushed aside by the rush of gold-hungry men, and the Cheyenne and Ogallala Indians either gave up with stoical cynicism, or they "gave up" at the end of ropes, and looking into the muzzles of guns. For the greed-crazed riffraff was not to be denied at any cost so trivial as the life of an Indian.

Lenny, himself, had come some four years after the gold fever had burned its brightest. He had come with a drive of cattle that was to be fattened in one of the Colorado parks. And he had been left to fend for himself when a scourge of grasshoppers had devastated the area, denuding it of its lush grass. The drover had left his starving cattle to die and had pulled stakes during a blinding thunderstorm.

Lenny, with three months' pay due him, was of a mind to follow the man and bring him to account. But the shrewd drover had missed a bet: the storm that had covered his sneak departure had also dealt furiously with the grasshoppers, drowning them by the millions. So instead of being forsaken entirely, Lenny found himself with fifty head of cattle left.

Knowing he would have no chance to hold his beeves against the depredations of roving bands of incensed Indians, or against the hungry palefaces themselves, Lenny had smartly searched out the chief of a near-by tribe and made a deal with him.

"My cattle for a proper bill-of-sale on an upland park and a piece of the mountain," he had offered Bright Eagle, the dwindling band's grave-faced chief. "That'll leave you with something to start with, instead of waiting until you are pushed out. It will leave me with my Mississippi yager and six-gun and my brains, providin' I have any o' the latter a-tall. I doubt it, sometimes, the way I been lettin' these unprincipled toughs get the best of me all the time!"

IN THE ensuing palaver with Bright Eagle and his braves, Lenny gathered that they were, for the most part, of a mind to slit his throat in retaliation for the slaughter of their herds of antelope and buffalo by the other whites, and just take over his cattle so. But Bright Eagle, disillusionment in his eyes but a smile of resignation on his face, talked the others down.

"The days of our hunting and roaming the plains are at an end," the old chief told his warriors sadly. "If we do not now take this young paleface's proposal, and move to other regions with our cattle that he will trade us, we shall live to rue this day. We shall live to see the day when other palefaces will take what they want with only bullets for our price. How speak you, O warriors?"

They spoke heatedly and long, these braves of Bright Eagle's. And it was all to one purpose.

"Our chief gives a woman's advice," they said bitterly. "Our brave leader would sell us into bondage for the sake of a few days more of peace—if it is peace when you wait for what is yours to be seized from you. What we need is a new leader!"

Bright Eagle had arisen to place himself between Lenny and the aroused redskins.

"Take your cattle, and choose your new leader, and—go!" he had said solemnly. "I stay behind, to die where I have lived. But if you make so much as a slight move to have your vengeance on this unoffending paleface, I shall carry my right of commanding you to our Great Council, and I shall tell to the paleface Great Father the names of those who have shed this man's blood. Make your choice!"

Gray Horse, an ambitious brave, had listened to all of this with sharp ears. Then he had arisen, gained the attention of his fellow warriors, and prevailed upon them to accept this one last mandate of Bright Eagle.

And Gray Horse had won out, and when the Indians led their cattle—Lenny's cattle—and started on a northeast trail for the plains of Wyoming, the old chief had started to walk away, his eyes sad, but

his calm face dignified.

"Jus' hold on, Bright Eagle," Lenny had smiled, barring the deposed chief's path. "I know enough of yore tongue to know that you just now saved my life. And anyway, I ain't so wise in the ways of yore country to be able to get by alone. Not just yet, I ain't. Besides, where do yuh think to go? Jus' yuh pitch yore tepee right where it allus was, an' you'n'-me will be sorta pardners."

The old chief's face had brightened momentarily. But the next moment, he shook his head gravely, somberly.

"You are good paleface, O Lenny. Just as Bright Eagle is a good Ogallala. But all palefaces and all Indians not good. It will come the day when Bright Eagle will be forced by palefaces to leave. If Lenny object, maybe he, too, get killed by the bad palefaces."

Lenny had played his trump card, then.

"Look yere, Bright Eagle—palefaces are great 'uns for havin' pardners. Both fer company, and fer pertection. And careless like, or maybe ag'in because I couldn't help myself, I might sorta turn up with the wrong pardner. Savvy? I can make sure I don't—and you can make sure to stay at yore old campin'-grounds, by signin' on as my pardner. Yore bill-of-sale to me covers me ag'in any thievin' sons takin' over here; and you bein' my partner covers yuh ag'in any onery hombre tryin' to run yuh out of the section. Say it's a deal, pardner, and let's get this settled!"

And Bright Eagle had called it a deal. . . .

Lenny had had cause to congratulate himself, more than once in the months that followed, for having insisted the old chief stay on at the mountain diggings with him.

For one thing, when Lenny had started to burrow into the out-cropping of rock, the Indian had regarded him wordlessly for a long time, then inquired what it was Lenny was after.

"Gold!"

Bright Eagle had shaken his head sadly.

"It is the madness. What good is gold? You cannot eat it. It furnishes no heat, no furs."

PATIENTLY, Lenny explained the paleface system of making the bright metal an exchange for which food, heat, clothing could be had.

"I want me my own outfit of cattle, some day," Lenny had told Bright Eagle. "I want to have a home, and a wife and kids, maybe, and to raise 'em up proper like. I want to have a hand in changin' this land from a wild land to a peopled, peaceful land."

Bright Eagle had smiled sadly at that.

"It was once a peaceful and wild land, my paleface friend," he murmured. "But it is understood by Bright Eagle what his friend means. And is it not so that discovery of gold here on the mountain will bring the bad ones to slay, and to steal?"

Lenny spoke of bills-of-sale, of land rights, of courts, of the paleface way of protecting for himself a man's property.

"Shore, there's bandits, and some of them operate in a legal manner," Lenny agreed. "But a man takes his chances on protectin' hisself, with the help of the courts. And his own good six-gun!"

"Are there not bad ones working in the courts of the paleface?" Bright Eagle asked shrewdly. "Yes?"

"Sometimes," Lenny shrugged. "But that's no reason a man shouldn't try. So that's why I'm diggin', Bright Eagle."

Bright Eagle had sighed, and motioned Lenny to follow him. "For ornaments, and for some work, the people of Bright Eagle had use of the metal-which-shines. But you seek in the wrong spot, paleface friend. It is hard work, and it is work which we stopped when we saw the evil that white men would do to discover gold. But if it means so much to you—dig where you see this outcropping of the black, hard rock. And be sure no other paleface sees what you do."

And the old chief had given Lenny invaluable tips on how to trap game, how to protect himself and his shack from the terrific storms, how to do the myriad bits of woodcraft-tricks that were the difference between life and death in the Colorado country and at which the redman had no master.

It was Bright Eagle who stayed on guard at the diggings when Lenny went on the widely-spaced trips to Medicine Pipe for supplies. It was Bright Eagle who entertained Lenny at the lonely campfire with tales of brave deeds of the old chief's youth, and of the wildly beautiful country that had been.

In return, Lenny told of the wonders of modern transportation, of modern communication via telegraph, of the great cities of the East and of the West. While Bright Eagle patently didn't believe most of it, the old chief listened with interest.

It was when Lenny started to teach the chief how to write a few simple English characters, and how to make words on paper, and how to read the meager books which Lenny brought back with him on his return from his trips to Medicine Pipe, that the venerable chief glowed with delight.

"There is a chamber within this mountain," he recounted to Lenny, "where men of the long-long-ago made writing with pictures on blocks of gold. If Bright Eagle can once again find the entrance to the mountain's tunnels, he will show you."

Lenny's heart had jumped at the vision, but it had sunk again when Bright Eagle, one morning, had made a report.

"Bright Eagle came across the trail of a strange man who is spying on us. Bright Eagle cut the man's trail in three places. Even now, the man is going in the direction of Medicine Pipe, perhaps to report to others what we do."

Lenny thought it over.

"No-o, I don't think so," he said. "Us two ain't hit anything yet, Bright Eagle. Not much, I mean. A little dust that we panned from the mountain stream, shore. But whoever it is spyin' on us would not speak of it to others, for he would want what we have for hisself alone. He'll likely make a play of some sort next time I go for supplies. Which will be soon."

And now, as he angled the burro across the park that sloped down from the diggings, it occurred to him what a natural hiding place any furtive watcher had here, and how easy it would be for such a one to make his move from ambush, and kill Lenny and Bright Eagle at a time of his own choosing.

"I can't go off half-cocked in town, should anybody show too much interest in me," he figured it. "Whoever it is has his eye and his mind on us. I got to beat him the same way he is workin' on us—by stealth an' smartness, an' not by any hot-headed gunplay. I can't seem to be too pleased with prospects on the mountain. And danged if that'll be hard! The main thing I got to go on is Bright Eagle's wild talk of hidden treasure."

HE GOT his sides of bacon, his cases of hardtack, his bags of corn-meal that Bright Eagle prized so highly, and then he took himself to Jessop's Livery to bargain for a Kentucky mule, so that the work at the diggings would go faster.

Jessop, a big, bearded man with a shrewd eye, looked interested until Lenny mournfully turned down all the available beasts he was offered.

"Too high, too high," he kept saying. "I ain't pannin' enough to pay that price. Anyway, all I want's to be able to git from here to there, to hit into some country where a man has a chance fer a livin'."

He was turning away in sour contemplation of leading the heavily-laden burro along the hard road back, on foot, when the twinkling-eyed Jessop called him back.

"Reckon yuh sure must be up ag'in it," he said. "If a man hits it good, he spends good. How much of a poke you willin' ter swap fer this here crittur?"

Lenny examined a sleepy-eyed mule carefully, mentioned a number of faults it had, and a number more that it didn't have, and finally measured out some gold dust on the man's packing-crate desk.

"Take it or leave it," he said. "I really don't give a dang should yuh not want to take it."

"No sale," Jessop grunted. "You must think I'm a fool."

"And if yuh think I'm of a mind to pay one grain more of dust, mister, yuh got me mixed up with thet mule," Lenny drawled. "Fish or cut bait, mister."

The man grinned.

"I'm fishin', son," he said. "Take yore mule." He looked around and winked at a husky, dark-browed man who had been watching the transaction and listening to the bargaining. "This lad really means it," Jessop said. "Lead away, son."

Lenny led the mule along the deep-rutted, muddy street, between the twin rows of jerry-built shanties and sheds and warehouses that formed Medicine Pipe's main street. He stopped in at Clancy's Golden Strike Saloon and ordered a hooker of Bourbon. He had downed it and was about to turn away when his eyes met in the mirror with the calculating glance of the husky, beetle-browed man who had

watched him dicker for the mule.

"Drink up an' have another, stranger," the husky man invited. "I'm Rellet. Dib Rellet. I liked the way you handled Jessop."

Lenny shrugged, nodded to the bartender, and touched rims with the man. Then he ordered a round on his own.

"Had t' handle 'im that way, Rellet. Ain't got the dust to do other."

"What's yore line?" Rellet asked, his eyes being very casual about it all.

"Cattle," Lenny said shortly, watching for the effect on Rellet. "Lost most of them, in a storm, and I'm workin' up a stake to go back and corral me some more."

Rellet smiled slightly. "How'd you lose 'em?" he asked, a mocking gleam in his eyes. "Fall off that mountain of yourn? Or did the Injun steal 'em? Th' old man yuh got workin' there?"

Lenny was glad now that he had saved his drink. Behind it he was able to hide his expression of satisfaction at the man's identifying himself as the snooper whose trail Bright Eagle had cut. For nobody else around here knew of Bright Eagle, knew of the diggings, knew even that Bright Eagle's band had pulled out and left Lenny alone there with the old chief.

"Lost 'em in a storm," Lenny said. "Been tryin' ever since to get me a decent poke so I can start in again."

"Where yuh from?"

Lenny had an impulse to snub this nosey man, but he knew that his safety lay in being smooth, being cagey, being as crafty as this man who was questioning him. He told it straight.

"Panhandle country, Texas way. My partner insisted on swinging up the valley to fatten the beeves in a park here and what didn't die when the grasshoppers ate everythin' up, was scattered in a storm."

"Know a man by name Ira Orkin in Panhandle?" Rellet asked next. "Stocky, red-headed man?"

Lenny managed to hide his surprise just in time. Ira Orkin was Lenny's employer, the man who had run out.

"I do," he murmured, after a moment. "Good ol' Ira!"

"Drink again, son," the swarthy Rellet boomed. "Ira is a man of my. own liver. You'n me are a-goin' to do business! Yessir, yuh have my word on it. We're goin' to do business."

"How?" Lenny asked.

RELLET winked at him.

"I'm goin' partners with yuh," he said. "I don't know how yuh come by that piece of mountain; nor where yuh got rid of them Injuns to, but I got a friend on the Injun Agency Commission who can make it all legal-like, fer us. The Injuns never would sell. There's too many of 'em, and Bright Eagle is too smart. He'd squawk from here t' Washin'ton, should we jump 'em. But you and me will partner that there mountain, an' it will be all legal—just like the Injuns sold it ter us."

"Wall, now, ain't that too bad, 'cause I already done bought th' place," Lenny said. "And full-legal. And I already got me a partner. Bright Eagle. That's full-legal, too. But I don't expec' yuh'd be interested, mister. The diggin's is porely, and the park ain't hardly big enough to interest yuh."

"I make up my own mind whut interests me, and what doesn't," Rellet said coldly, his eyes going hard. "So yuh'd rather have a redskin savage to a white man, huh?"

"Since yuh wasn't aroun' when I was doin' business," Lenny murmured, "I ain't to blame there."

Lenny was thinking fast, was trying to let the man down without getting him angry. He recalled the papers were made out for the sale of the park and the mountain in return for the cattle. And the cattle were his by reason of Ira Orkin's skipping and leaving them to die.

It just could be that slippery Ira Orkin —and Rellet—could establish that Orkin's cattle had closed the deal. Thus the crooked friend that Rellet had spoken of might be able to work a decision that Orkin—and Rellet—owned the park and the mountain. So he decided to keep it as friendly as he could.

Rellet thought about it a while, finally nodding to himself in satisfaction at a thought. When Lenny thanked him for the drink and was paying his tab, a stranger came up and barred his way, nodding to Rellet at the same time.

"This the young man you were telling me about, Dib?" he said. "The promising

young miner?" He flashed Lenny a toothy smile that was as false as a desert mirage. "How-de-do, young man."

"No, no," Rellet said hurriedly. "No, Judge. This is—uh—a young cattleman from—uh—Texas. Just talkin' about some old friends, we was." He said to Lenny, with a hearty boom, "Remember me to old Ira when yuh see 'im."

Lenny loosed his mule and his burro from the hitching rail and got under way. Three shots in rapid succession jarred the peace of the street, and a man stumbled out of the Farewell Saloon, clutching his abdomen and coughing blood.

A lean, shark-faced man in stock and black coat and trousers followed out of the saloon door, his smoking six-gun still held hip-high, his beady eyes hard on the wounded man.

But the victim of the shooting pitched to the rutted road, did his death dance with spurred heels, and lay still.

"That's Rale, th' Injun Commissioner, done the shootin'!" Lenny overheard an awed voice whisper, as he pulled close to the Last Chance Hotel porch, fighting his scared mule. "Yuh cain't buck Joe Rale and get away with it."

"Not with him and the Judge bein' closer'n than a Cheyenne scalpin'," was the answer. "Not hardly."

"Rale, the Judge, and Rellet," Lenny thought, as he plodded his way up his mountain. "What chance have we got? Only that Rellet, fer now, is satisfied ter keep his mouth tight."

Bright Eagle was excited, and Lenny blinked. It was the first time Lenny had ever seen him so.

The old chief received the various gifts —bacon, cornmeal, tobacco—with murmured thanks.

"Bright Eagle have um gift, too, for pale friend," the chief said. "Look!"

Lenny stared at the cube of solid gold the man had in his withered old hand, picked it up, hefted the weight of it.

"Wh-where'd you get this?" he asked, amazed. "Y-you found the—the old passageway?"

Bright Eagle opened his mouth in a grin. But before he answered, he studied Lenny with keen eyes and slowly closed off the smile.

"Bright Eagle's friend is troubled," the old chief said. "It is something that worries him much!"

LENNY considered telling the old man but decided against it, finally.

"No sense in gettin' th' old man upset," he reasoned. "Maybe I'm imaginin' things, like." He forced a smile and said, "Aw, I'm just sorta tired, Bright Eagle. Say, now—about the gold piece, this square—whut is it?"

"Part of picture," Bright Eagle said, gesturing with his fine old hands. "Many such small pieces of gold are made, then are gathered together in solid wall to make picture."

Lenny nodded eagerly.

"Yeah, I know what yuh mean. But—are there many more? Bright Eagle, we're rich. Our fortune is made!"

Bright Eagle's eyes left Lenny's face, and a frown came over the old man's brow as he looked down into the valley. Lenny whipped around to see what the chief was staring at.

"It is—nothing," Bright Eagle murmured, at last. "It is that Bright Eagle is getting old, and is as fearful as an old squaw. No, my paleface friend, the passage is not—found. It is just that I came upon this one piece, among the rock on the far side. It was perhaps dropped there many years ago."

"Oh," Lenny said. "It shore is heavy."

He went about making a meal for them, and suddenly stopped, his eyes on Bright Eagle. There was something embarrassed in the old chief's manner, something ashamed, as if—

"As if he—lied," Lenny thought suddenly, "an' was ashamed of it."

Later, he said:

"If somebody had a idee to try 'n' buy you out, Bright Eagle—would you sell?"

Bright Eagle's piercing black eyes met Lenny's in a full, long look, and the young miner felt as if he were an unwilling witness while his mind was being analyzed, taken to pieces, put together again.

Finally Bright Eagle stirred and shifted his gaze to the golden peaks that the sun was setting on to the west.

"Bright Eagle mebbe sell um," he murmured, his eyes far away. "But—for a full price."

Lenny blinked and thought, "Why, the ole scoundrel, is he hintin' that if I talk loud and interestin', maybe he will recall

that lost passage?"

But he was ashamed the next moment when the chief went to his corner and returned a minute later with a second gift for Lenny. It was a leather belt, studded with gold knobs and pieces, and with a solid-gold buckle.

Lenny whistled.

"Whooey!" he exclaimed. "How much fer this, Bright Eagle? You sellin' it ter me?"

The old Indian gave him a look of reproof.

"There is no talk of price among friends, my paleface partner," he said. "Only to strangers and enemies is price mentioned!"

"Th' old magician knows whut I was thinkin', when I come back from Medicine Pipe," Lenny knew. "Only to enemies and to strangers does he talk price! And—he said he'd sell only fer a full price. What's his idee of a full price?"

It was the next day that Lenny noticed Bright Eagle had grown furtive, was keeping a secret from him. He knew it when he came back from a fruitless try in the diggings, to find Bright Eagle missing.

He was lying down, and thus hidden from Bright Eagle's view, when the old chief came along the trail to the shack. He paused by the water-hole and washed thoroughly, carefully, and with his eyes constantly going down the path toward the diggings. Finally, the chief started down in that direction.

Lenny waited a moment, then raced down the trail to the park and was retracing his steps when Bright Eagle came back along the path above, toward the shack.

"Just foolin' around," Lenny said lamely. "What you been doin', Bright Eagle?"

"The fires burn low in Bright Eagle," the aged chief said. "Bright Eagle has been sleeping much of late, paleface friend."

Lenny caught the evasion and puzzled.

"Doesn't he trust me?" he wondered. "Or—has Bright Eagle been bit by the goldbug, too, and is he tryin' ter figure a shrewd deal?"

THAT night, in the moonlight, Bright Eagle stirred from his blankets and slithered along the path, his rifle in his hand. Lenny arose and watched, until two flat, smacking explosions sounded from the rifle, and there was a startled yell and a savage curse from the park below.

Finally Bright Eagle came back in.

"A stray and hungry wolf, perhaps," he explained casually.

"Yuh ain't far wrong!" Lenny thought; but the wolf he had in mind was of the two-legged variety. . . .

Lenny was concerned when he inspected the mine entrance, the next morning. Some dirt had cascaded down from the mine roof into piles, and the sturdy oak uprights showed signs of having been tampered with.

The young miner puzzled over it.

"Could it be that Bright Eagle is crossin' me up, is actually plannin' to do 'way with me?" he wondered.

It didn't seem reasonable, despite the evidence, because if this had been Bright Eagle's intention, he could have done it long ago, while Lenny slept, or was otherwise off his guard.

"I've heard an Injun will go a long way ter protect hisself an' his property," Lenny mused. "Mebbe so, mebbe so." He frowned. "But I would have swore Bright Eagle believed in the pardnership, and had a lot of pride in it."

He was especially curious about a heavy vine-rope that the old chief had patiently made, and that was now secured to one of the farthest advanced uprights in the new mine passage. He blinked his blue eyes at it in the gloom of the passage.

"Somethin' the old boy has in his mind," he tried to tell himself. But he didn't go any farther into the passage that day. Instead, he contented himself with cleaning up the floor and let it go at that.

He had a surprise coming to him when he came along the path to the shack. Bright Eagle was squatted on the ground, smoking his long pipe and listening to the sing-song of a burly man who had come up in Lenny's absence.

It was Dib Rellet.

"Howdy?" Rellet greeted him, a tight smile on his face.

Lenny met the man's hail with a hard look.

"What yuh doin' here?" he asked bluntly. "Usually, folk wait ontil they are invited. Suggest yuh remember that, next time, Rellet."

"Oho!" the big man laughed. "That any way to talk with yore new partner?" He jerked his head at Bright Eagle. "You and him own this piece, legal-like, you say? Well, I'm buyin' it legal-like. Me'n Judge Cader and Joe Rale."

Lenny saw the tightness about the eyes that betrayed Bright Eagle's otherwise emotionless expression, and his eyes touched over to his bunk, where his holstered gun hung. His yager, too, was on the far wall. He was working his way across, almost casually, when Rellet raised his voice to call:

"Danged if th' young catamount ain't actin' up, Joe! You near-by Joe?"

"Watchin' everythin'," came the answer from the door. Lenny twisted his head and was staring into the baleful eyes of Joe Rale, Rellet's friend. "And Judge Cader, he's sorta watchin' from dead ahead."

"Shore am," came another voice. The man who had stopped Lenny at the Golden Strike Saloon barged into view at the window.

Lenny chewed his cud of tobacco a moment.

"Looks like the Judge done declared hisself in, eh, Rellet?" he said. "Remember how yuh tried to freeze him out, thar in the saloon?"

Rellet flushed.

"Now, now, don't try t' make fer trouble, boy." He cleared his throat. "Like I said, we're buyin' Bright Eagle's share. Everything square and above-board. Right and true, Bright Eagle?"

"As true as it is I counseled my braves to kill this man, Lenny, when he first appeared," the old chief answered solemnly.

Lenny's heart tunked at the words. They had Bright Eagle trapped, these three. Under some threat. Because what the old chief said was anything but true. Bright Eagle had argued long and potently with his braves to spare Lenny. But now his words belied it.

RELLET was speaking again. "And we're all set but the price, which same will be set after we look the mine over."

"This one," Bright Eagle said, indicating Lenny with his head, "will not come along. This one is tricky and treacherous, and he might trap us all within the mine. He has already managed to construct a secret passage to the great wealth, and believes Bright Eagle does not know it! This one is not to come."

"Bright Eagle, that's a lie!" Lenny said hotly.

"It is true," the old chief said gently. "It is as true as it is that you and I have lived in discord and in suspicion, here on the mountain, each waiting for the other to relax his watchfulness for just one moment. It is that true."

"Looks like yuh are right tricky, my young friend," Rellet said dryly. "Reckon we're a-goin' to have to put yuh under guard whilst we have us our look. Rale? Suppose yuh can watch whilst the Judge and me have us a look, with Bright Eagle?"

Judge Cader, who had closed in with Rale, shifted his small and suspicious eyes from one to another of them.

"Mebbe I'd best guard him. There's something about this smells bad, to me."

Rellet fought the anger on his face.

"Here is the full setup, Judge," he said, slowly. "Me and Joe Rale, here, have a hunch that this young cowpoke bought the mine with cattle stole from an old friend of mine. Ira Orkin. If we are right, he ain't no part a rightful owner. We're buyin' Bright Eagle off soon's he shows us the real wealth of the mine."

"I'll just bet!" Judge Cader snarled. "Sounds like yuh, I must say not!" His weasel-small eyes darted from one to another of them. "Wall, if I go—and I ain't sayin' I will—I ain't a-goin' fust!"

"Why don't yuh shut yore legalistic and gassy mouth fer a bit?" Rellet blared. "I'm a-talkin', Judge! Now, like I said, if them cattle were Orkin's, why—we got the mine full and legal, every bit of it."

"Wall," Cader said, as something passed between him and Rellet, something unspoken, "I'd much prefer it if this here cowpoke-miner was tied up, and all three of us went with the Injun to—look."

Rale's eyes narrowed on Rellet, and the Indian Agency man then nodded his head slightly.

"Suits me better that-a-way, too, Dib," he said. "A man can't be too careful, yuh know."

Rellet blinked his eyes, and sighed.

"I know what yuh mean," he said, after a pause. "Must say, I been a-thinkin' it

were mighty convenient Judge Cader showed up way he did, when we was comin' up the trail!"

Contempt showed in the old Indian's eyes at this revelation of the mutual distrust of the lawless three, each for the other.

"And see that you tie um good!" the old man put in, his glance openly suspicious on the other three men. "Mebbe you fix um so he escape and get to mine, hah?"

Rellet grinned. "Good figurin', Bright Eagle. Good figurin'. Reckon we'll all watch this rope-tyin', huh, boys?"

As Rellet covered Lenny with his gun, and the other two men frisked him for further weapons and then started to secure his wrists and ankles with ropes, Bright Eagle slipped a piece of paper into hiding under his blankets, and swiftly roped a small knife to the leg of a stool, without letting the other men see.

Rellet paused, swung his eyes around at the Indian.

"What you doin', red man?" he asked sharply.

"Me see um there are no guns left near young man," the old chief said calmly. "You pay full price for um mine, like you promise?"

"The full price," Rellet said heavily. "I'll warrant yuh won't have no complaint to make, red man."

Bright Eagle's glance was full on Lenny when the Indian repeated, slowly:

"No complaint. No complaint. White man has been friend, has been honest, has been joy. Bright Eagle glad such white man live, so he knows happiness comes to his beloved mountains and plains and valleys some day."

"Yuh're a smart Injun," Rellet chuckled, winking at his shifty-eyed companions. "Yuh shore know yore friends. Well, let's git along, so we can settle on a proper price to pay yuh, Bright Eagle."

THE other two men followed, grinning and winking behind the old man's back. Bright Eagle led them into the mine without so much as a backward glance.

Five minutes later, Lenny was working feverishly to make the last few feet to the stool on which Bright Eagle had so cunningly lashed the knife.

He got to the stool, managed to upset it, gathered it to him with his tied ankles, and then rolled to his side to hunch back against the keen blade with his wrist-ropes.

Twice, he cut himself but he worked on. There was a fatalistic manner about Bright Eagle, a tone of finality in the old man's words that Lenny hadn't liked. At first, he had thought the oldster had it rigged for him, Lenny, to get free and follow after them. Ambush them somehow, even though they had taken care not to leave him with a gun or with ammunition, or any knife they could discern about the shack.

But he realized that, even from ambush, it would be all but hopeless for him to trap these three ruthless, frontier-wise men. One or two, he might get. But a trio—never!

Certainly, it was hopeless without a gun. But Lenny made the try, at last had his wrists free, was ripping at the thongs with the knife to free his ankles.

He was racing across the clearing, a pinch-bar in his hands, straight for the mouth of the tunnel, when voices came to him—the voices of those men inside, and of Bright Eagle.

"Vine-rope to hidden way," he heard Bright Eagle saying, as he gained the mouth of the mine. "You help um Bright Eagle and he show you. Here! Take hold, and pull. Pull hard!"

A shifting rumble stopped Lenny, and dust was seeping from the mine roof in a thin cloud. "Pull!" Bright Eagle was calling. "All three you, pull!"

"No, Bright Eagle, no!" Lenny roared, cupping his hands to mouth. "Bright Eagle—no!"

There was a louder sliding sound, the dust was thicker, and then Lenny could hear Rellet's voice cursing wildly, Rellet's heavy bellow, and Rellet's words.

"Blast him, he's tryin' to trap us!" Rellet yelled. "That's the main prop of the mine we've pulled down, boys. Look, she's a-comin' in on us! Dang yuh, Bright Eagle!"

The heavy roar of a six-gun came to Lenny as he started to race ahead, a roar that was caught up somewhere deep within the mountain and raised to a deafening cataclysm of sound as an avalanche of stone and rock and dust was loosed deep

(Concluded on page 106)

Raiford looked squarely into the muzzle of Clint Banfield's six-shooter

OWLHOOT BREED

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Tip Raiford fights to overcome his heritage of lawlessness and travel the straight and narrow road like a real man!

TIP RAIFORD had half-ridden the legs off his cow horse trying to find a range job when old Dave Kernan took him on. Trouble was, he had come of a bad-lands outlaw set, and few wanted to believe that he really meant to ride a straight trail.

The old D K crew didn't want to believe it. Tip knew cows and worked hard, and got along with them. Still, they were always watching him. He could see that.

One day Kernan sent him to town for the ranch mail. It was a four-hour ride, and the sun was down when he came back. Gaunt, bearded old Dave was on the front gallery of the big weather-beaten ranchhouse when he rode in. He dismounted at the steps, de-

livered the letters and papers, and was about to turn away when Kernan inquired narrowly:

"Ever know anybody named Clint Banfield, Tip?"

Raiford's brows puckered. "No. Why?"

"New man I hired after yuh left for town, and I sort of wanted to get a line on him. He's not ordinary, somehow. If I hadn't needed a rider, I'd have passed him up."

One of the letters old Dave opened enclosed a tax receipt. The cattleman went inside to put it in the big iron safe that was a standing joke to his boys. They swore the safe could be opened with a toothpick.

Tip Raiford led his horse around to the rear. Twilight was settling, and the crew drifted in singly, and by twos and threes. Bow-legged, heavily built "Pothooks" Arnett, the range boss, stepped from his saddle within half a rod of Tip.

"Old Dave said yuh had a new rider," Raiford remarked, to make friendly talk.

"Yeah," Arnett muttered. "Don't know cows much but seems to be willin'. Don't have a heap to say. Good man to let alone, is my guess. There he is now."

Clint Banfield, the man Pothooks pointed out, was tall, wiry, and dark. His clothing was nondescript. He carried his six-shooter butt forward on the left, though the other Kernan men carried theirs butt rearward on the right.

Banfield reined in, and his somber eyes were busy, missing little or nothing. Then his gaze riveted upon Tip. Could be, Tip thought, because he was the only Kernan rider whom Banfield had not seen. There are men who dislike each other on sight for no apparent reason, and here were two of them.

"Well," Raiford said a little angrily, "what about it?"

Banfield ignored that, dismounted, and led his horse off toward a corral.

"Better go easy, Tip," Pothooks Arnett advised magnanimously. "Some powerful good, fast shots tote their weepons on the left thataway."

TWICE during supper in the bunkhouse leanto, Clint Banfield caught Tip Raiford's speculative eye upon him. Dave Kernan had said that Banfield wasn't "ordinary." He certainly wasn't, Tip decided. Although Raiford didn't know the man from Adam's off ox, he did know the breed. For he himself had ridden the wild trails, and when a man rides such trails he comes to know the breed that rides with him.

Before bedtime, the dark stranger got Raiford's attention slyly, beckoned with his chin and walked out. Tip followed him into the dim star radiance. A few steps from the door Banfield turned with this.

"I notice yuh keep watchin' me, cowbuck," he half-whispered. "Think yuh've seen me somewheres else, mebbe?"

Tip was not in the mood to give him any satisfaction whatever, and said nothing at all.

"So yuh won't talk."

Still no response. It did not occur to Raiford that silence as a weapon may easily have two edges.

"What's this I hear about you comin' from a bad long-looper set and turnin' a new leaf, sort of?" Banfield said.

Tip spoke then. "I did have that much sense," he said. "I'd seen where the rest of my folks went and didn't want to go along."

The dark stranger snarled something that Tip didn't catch, and went back into the bunkhouse. . . .

Dry weather had the Kernan range creek so low that in places it was foul. Some of the cattle were nosing out seep springs in the edges of the broken hills that rimmed the wide valley, easy prey to thieves unless they were driven back. Raiford was one of the half-dozen men whom Pothooks Arnett put to work the next day riding outer reaches.

About mid-morning Tip found a clear little spring ahead of cattle, emptied his canteen and got down to refill it with cold water. He hadn't the least idea that there was another human being within a mile of him. Then a granite-hard voice spoke from the vicinity of a boulder a short distance out to his right.

"Stand up with yore paws high, cowbuck."

Raiford jerked his head around, dropping his canteen, his gun hand darting toward his holster—and looked squarely into the muzzle of Clint Banfield's six-shooter.

"Don't commit suicide!" Banfield clipped.

It promised to be just that if Tip did not obey. He straightened, with his hands in the air. Banfield walked from behind the boulder, and the next moment had Tip's gun inside his shirt. The new puncher then backstepped quickly to the huge stone, put out his free left hand, got the rein of his horse, and led the animal into view. The next instant he was in his saddle.

"Mebbe yuh won't mind tellin' me what this is all about," Raiford suggested wryly.

"I got somethin' to show yuh, and I want yuh to meet the Beard," Banfield said glibly. "On yore hoss there. We're goin' to take a little ride. Bring yore canteen, full."

"Who and where is this Beard jigger?" demanded Tip.

"Tellin' yuh that," said Banfield, "would plumb spoil the surprise. I'm shore bent on surprisin' folks. Yuh comin', cowbuck?"

"Reckon I'll have to. Only I would like to know what's behind this."

Banfield laughed, an odd laugh deep in his throat, and became sober again.

"I wanted to talk this out with yuh last night," he said, "but yuh wouldn't, and now it's too late. Come on!"

His dark eyes became menacing slits. He drew a bead on Tip's left shirt pocket. Tip finished filling his canteen and got into his saddle with it. He rode ahead of Banfield, over rocky ground that would show few if any telltale hoofprints, into and through the nearest break in the ragged hills.

For ten miles beyond the hills stretched rolling desert, and beyond this barren waste lay a flat plain that was equally barren, with an old and weather-worn house near a dry creek bed in the middle of it.

"I know where I am now, all right," Raiford muttered. "Water failure here ruined one of the best ranches in the state, so long ago it's nearly been forgot."

As they rode nearer, he made out a patched-up old corral with two lean horses inside it.

BANFIELD stopped him a few yards from the ramshackle front gallery. Two men stood there waiting. One of them was a big man with a heavy sunburned beard and pale, mean eyes. The other had a squat build, long arms, and a bullet-shaped head. Each carried a heavy six-shooter.

"Meet the Beard, Tip," Banfield said in mock politeness, and hurried on, "He's our boss, Tip. Other hombre there is Scutter Simpson."

"Don't mind tellin' him, do yuh?" the Beard stormed. "Who is he and what'd yuh bring him here for?"

Banfield grinned. Plainly he did not fear his boss.

"Why mind tellin' him?" he repeated.

[*Turn page*]

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"What'd I bring him here for? He spotted me first thing at the Kernan ranch, though he wasn't plumb satisfied about it and didn't mention it to anybody else. We'll both be missed at Kernan's. So whatever we do will need to be done right off, soon after dark, I'd say."

"Shore he didn't tell anybody else?" the Beard wanted to know.

"Dead shore. I watched him close."

"How'd yuh find things there?"

"All right," Banfield answered promptly. "What we'd heard was correcto, accordin' to range *hablar*. This cowbuck's name is Tip Raiford, and range *hablar* also told me he's a wild kitten, so we better keep a keen eye on him. If yuh're open to suggestions, Boss, here's a plan I got worked out. Won't matter if Raiford hears. Now listen!

"One of us stays here to keep the cowbuck out of mischief. Other two bobs up on the edge of Dave Kernan's range at dark and does some shootin'. Old Dave and his crew will think it's me and Raiford tyin' into some rustler outfit, and will ride lickety-split to help us, prob'ly, leavin', only the bunkhouse cook there at headquarters. Kernan ain't got no family. Apple pie, feller!"

The Beard may have been the boss of the robber trio. But Clint Banfield, certainly, was the trio's brains.

Tip Raiford was not having to make guesses. It was that old iron safe of Kernan's, which the boys laughingly swore could be opened with a toothpick. There was no bank in town. Tip would not have lied outright in his own interests, but for old Dave, who had been kind to him, he would lie like a dog.

"That last shipment of D K cows was paid for with a check, Banfield, not cash," he said.

"Yeah," the tall, wiry, dark man hooted. "A check by express, done up in a package thick as yore arm and all covered with red seals."

He knew his way around!

At the bearded big man's order, Raiford stepped off his horse, let the reins fall, and went into the old house. The dusty living room was littered with horse gear, canteens, blankets, wooden boxes that had been in use as chairs. Raiford sat down on a box, took out his bandanna and mopped his perspiring face. The Beard and Banfield had come in with him.

Soon afterward, Scutter Simpson entered carrying the D K cowboy's canteen. Water was an item here.

"Grub, Scut," said Banfield.

Simpson took three tins of beef from under a blanket. They gave none of the beef to Tip. But he scarcely noticed that. His mind was busy trying to figure a way of preventing the robbery of Dave Kernan.

He was a little surprised when he learned that Banfield was to stay there and guard him while the other two rode to the Kernan place. But he needn't have been. Inactivity had the big man and Simpson on edge. Already Clint Banfield had done his part, and done it well.

After the two had saddled and ridden away, Raiford talked with his captor.

"Looks like you fellers would go after heavy stuff like banks, or stages, instead of stuff on the order of this," he commented.

"Yuh'll admit we're still ridin' free, won't yuh?" Banfield said. "One big stickup'll put more lawmen on yore trail than half a dozen ord'nary stickups. We try not to kill anybody, but we do it when we have to—and you might remember that in case yuh get a notion to out-smart me."

Raiford scowled at the floor. Out-smarting this man was going to be difficult.

The lazy afternoon dragged on. Sitting there with his elbows on his knees, hat drawn low over his eyes, Tip kept trying to figure a getaway plan. Clint Banfield sat on a box some three yards from him, and Clint's gun hand was ready.

NEITHER of the two had spoken for an hour when Banfield said;

"Sun's almost down. I better hogtie yuh now, cowbuck."

The D K rider caught his breath. Tied, he would have no chance at all!

As the tall, dark man put his hands on his knees to rise, Tip Raiford sprang like a puma. He was not merely on Banfield, but he was all over him, fighting desperately for possession of the six-shooter that Banfield carried on the left for a 'cross-body draw.

Tip had muscles as tough as seasoned hickory. So had his adversary. Just as the weapon exploded in Clint's grip, Raiford brought a fist upward and to Clint's chin with the force of a wild horse's kick.

Banfield dropped his weapon and fell backward to the dusty floor. The cowboy also wilted, for the hot slug had scored his neck and clipped the base of his skull.

Minutes upon minutes passed. Twilight

was gathering. Then Banfield's rock-hard voice beat into Raiford's ears.

"Yuh don't learn things easy, cownurse, do yuh?"

His gun was in his hand again, and he sat on the box he'd sat on before.

Tip said nothing. He raised himself to an elbow, and a terrific pounding set up in the back of his head. He lay back on the floor and closed his eyes. There was just one bright spot—Banfield hadn't tied him. Perhaps because he thought Tip was hurt badly. There had been enough bleeding to give that impression.

Satin dusk was falling when Banfield lighted a tallowdip on the old mantel. Darkness came, two hours of it, three hours, and Raiford still lay motionless on the floor. Then there was a thudding of hoofs. Banfield froze. A shrill whistle, and he relaxed. After a few minutes, squat Scutter Simpson followed the big, bearded man into the old ranchhouse living room.

"Get it?" asked Banfield.

"Shore, Clint," answered the Beard. "Everything went just like yuh said it would. Only there was two cooks to knock out after the old hombre and his boys rode to investigate the shootin' me and Scut done. A crowbar from the shop went through the door of that old rattletrap safe like it was lard. Didn't it, Scut?"

"Yeah," Simpson said, "but at that it took us some little time. Fact is, we'd hardly got clear when some of the outfit comes pilin' back, suspicious. We could hear 'em talkin', and they think this Tip cowboy—he used to be a sort of hellion, it seems—is workin' with us!"

No bullet could have hit Raiford harder than that. Never had he been so mad. He sat up quickly, but instantly realized that hot talk now was the sheerest folly, and kept silent.

"So! Possumin', eh?" Banfield rapped. "Tarnation lot of good it done yuh!"

"Yuh had that gun of yours on me every minute," Raiford couldn't help saying.

Banfield told the other two outlaws of his fight with Tip. Then his dark eyes narrowed on a sudden thought, and he turned back to the D K rider.

"Yuh can't foller straight trails, *amigo*," he said. "They won't let yuh. A scrapper like you might be a good man to travel owlhoot with me and the Beard and Scut. Just

[*Turn page*]

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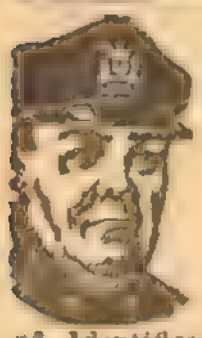

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one thing there. How would yuh prove to us yuh mean it?"

"I'm boss, Clint," the Beard put in sourly.

"Don't matter about that," Banfield said. "Yuh always argued they ought to be four of us, didn't yuh? Yeah, and I did too, and so did Scut. This cowbuck is a scrapper. He's from a tribe of scrappers, I gather. Yuh want to talk to him?"

Tip Raiford went to his feet. He looked pale in the feeble light of the tallowdip on the mantel, but he was steady. If he had a chance, it lay in pretending to play into their hands.

"S'pose yuh tell me, Clint," he said, "how I can show yuh that I mean it?"

The bearded man had the answer.

"We'll tackle a bigger job, Clint, and we'll take Tip along and let him prove up on that—keepin' him in front so's we can watch him, yuh understand. Yuh'll recollect we heard that the stage which gets to a certain town around noon always has real *dinero* in the strong-box."

"Also," Banfield broke in sharply, "we heard that there's always a guard on the high seat with the driver and that he totes a sawed-off shotgun, eight-gage, with two barrels. This big-bore gun would spray enough buckshot to mow us all down, even to the hosses!"

NOBODY replied to that. Raiford calmly began tying his bandanna around the bullet gash in his neck. Then Banfield spoke again. He had brightened.

"Tip could drill the guard first thing, from the bushes. That'd show he meant it!"

The Beard and Scutter Simpson nodded promptly, and looked toward Tip.

"That'd be easy," the D K rider said, and nothing more.

They had supper then, and Raiford was given a tin of salmon as his share.

Though his wound gave him little pain, he slept almost none that night. They watched him closely, taking turns at it. A getaway was impossible. . . .

Not long after the middle of the next morning the four men pulled their horses to a halt in tall chaparral flanking a sharp curve in the stage road. About the neck of each rider there was a loosely-tied bandanna, ready to be slipped into place as a mask.

Only now did Clint Banfield give Tip Raiford back his six-shooter. A lump formed in Tip's throat in spite of him. Sickening to

think of his being found dead here later, masked, with not a soul on earth to believe anything except that he really had been a member of the stickup gang!

And yet, he did not regret having taken the straight trail.

"Listen," Banfield was muttering. "Wheels and hoofs. Yuh hear 'em, cowbuck? Kick yore hoss a little nearer to the road, where yuh can see better, and when the stage slows for this curve, let the guard have it!"

Tip kicked his mount a little nearer to the road. His gun was ready in his hand, his mask in place. Peering through the brush, he saw the four-horse vehicle coming at the head of an eddying dust cloud. A long, long minute passed.

"Now—quick!" barked Clint Banfield.

It was the most desperate move of Tipton Raiford's life. He jerked his six-shooter up, ducked forward off his horse, and landed on his knees, shooting back at the robber trio. Two of them cut down at him. The other shot at the stage-coach guard. The big-bore shotgun erupted in a tremendous, jarring double roar. The Kernan cowboy did not hear this. He had dropped into an abyss of blackest oblivion. . . .

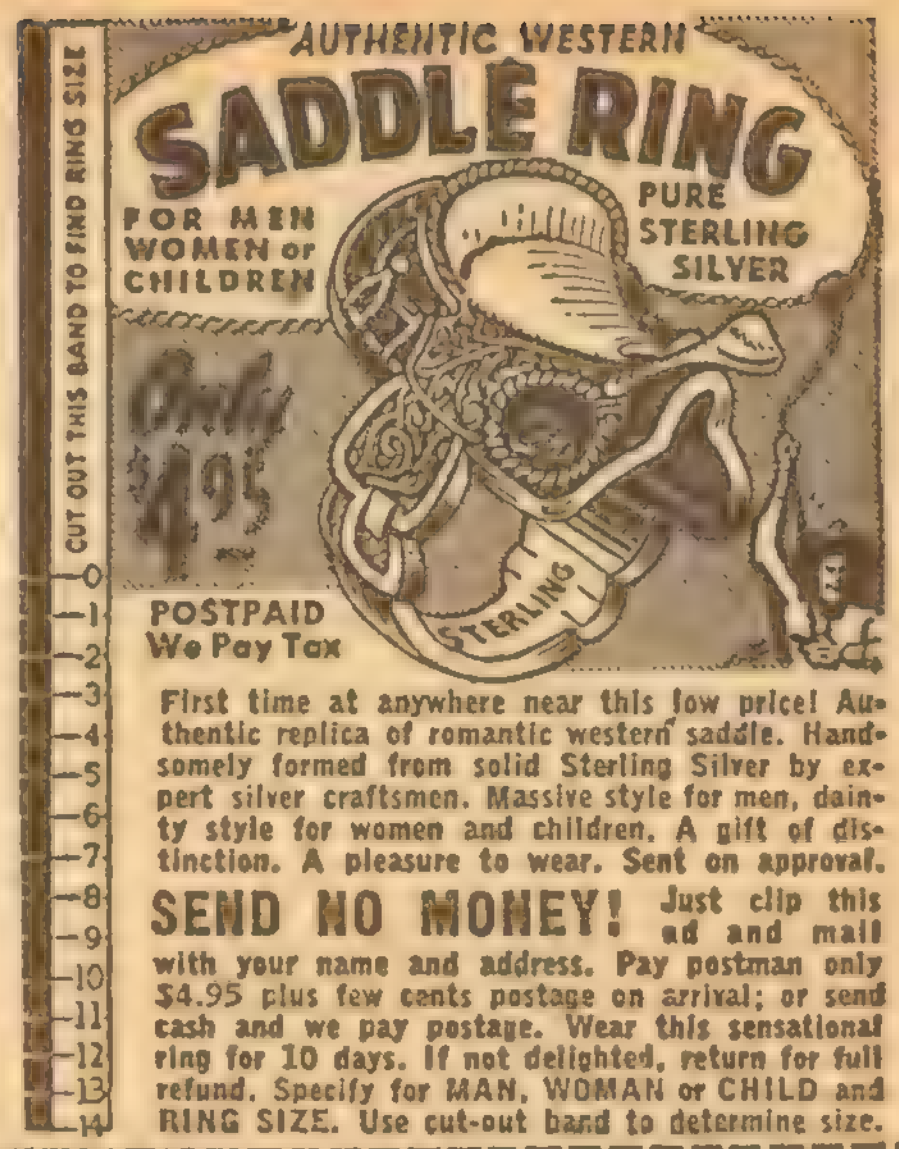
When he came out of it, hours and hours later, he was blinking uncertainly at an oil lamp that burned in old Dave Kernan's big weather-beaten ranchhouse. Near the bed stood old Dave, a doctor, and Range Boss Pothooks Arnett, all solemn-faced.

Memory served Raiford. He wanted to talk, but Kernan lifted a hand that shut him up. "Keep sort of quiet, Tip. Yuh got three bullet-holes in yore carcass, but the doc says yuh'll be all right if yuh keep quiet. The Scut hombre told it all anyhow, before he cashed. The driver thinks yuh got Banfield. What you didn't get, the cannon shotgun did. Yeah, all three dead. The guard stopped a slug but will live. I got all my money back."

"But—but how," stammered Raiford, smiling at the man who had been kind to him, "how did yuh know—"

"Six of us was out at daybreak, Tip," Kernan explained, "lookin' for robbers' hoss tracks, and found 'em other side the west hills. We follered 'em clean to the stage road, arrivin' a little late for the ruckus. Owlhoot breed or not, cowboy, as long as I've got a ranch yuh've got a job."

Again Tip smiled at the man who had been kind to him. The straight trail had paid off.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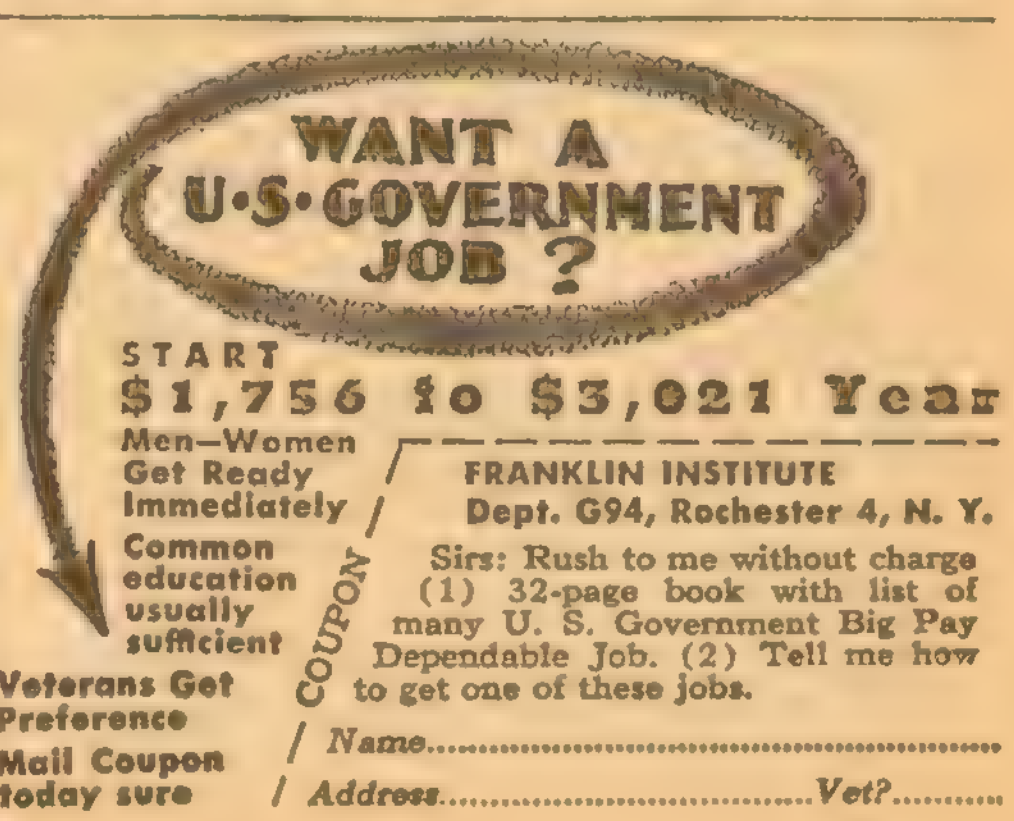
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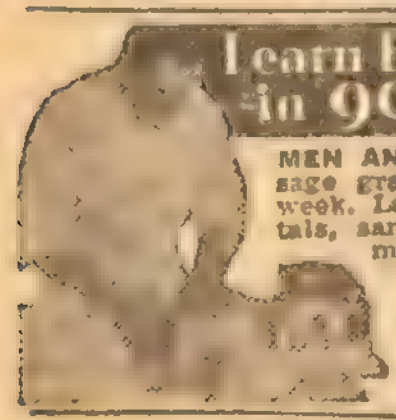

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THE FULL PRICE

(Concluded from page 98)

inside where Bright Eagle had led the three legal thieves.

With a choking sob, Lenny turned and raced back, made it to the mine entrance just as the whole passageway collapsed with a roar. He stood outside there, the sun obscured by the film of dust that eddied up from the tomb of Bright Eagle and his three captors now turned captive.

"No, no, no!" Lenny shouted again, and started to force his way in. But the passage had closed. It was now blocked by the fall of thousands of tons of dirt from the dislodged and crushed roof of the mine.

He was aware that the new dirt, loosed by the slide Bright Eagle had caused with his roped upright, was studded with small, solid squares of gold. But right now he didn't care.

Nor would he care even for some time after he found the painfully scratched note Bright Eagle had left him under his blanket—a scrawled note that said:

This paper say that Bright Eagle, Chief of Ogallalas, has sold his share in Mountain Mine, and he has been paid, in return, the full price.

Lenny knew he was a rich man, that the old chief had cleverly surmised Rellet and his gang had closed in, that Bright Eagle had rigged a trap that would at once wipe out his and Bright Eagle's enemies and open up the hidden passage to the old mine chamber. For Lenny May.

He knew that the sun was somehow bright again over a Medicine Pipe that would never again see Dib Rellet or Judge Cader or Joe Rale, or know what had happened to them ever.

He looked out across the valley that would some day know the peace and the content of a free people, would know it because native-born American heroes like Bright Eagle were not afraid to pay the full price for it.

"Happy hunting, Bright Eagle," he murmured. "Happy hunting!"

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 9)

The events owe their popularity to the rule that all the residents are ordered to grow whiskers for Frontier Week. Giving every tired, constantly-scraped male face a badly-needed yearly vacation. A savvy hombre has figured out that 55 million Americans shave on an average of every 1½ days.

Paper Pots and Pans

There's one subject on which bachelors and housewives agree on plumb unanimous, and that is dish-washing is the meanest of all chores. Hardest to wash are the pots and pans. Now along comes an assortment of waxed paper utensils for oven-baking. Just peel 'em off, like the thing cup cakes come in, and throw 'em away. So far nobody has invented a paper frying skillet but *quien sabe* —who knows when?

Paper clothes may come, too. Roundup cowhands have known for years that a handy way to keep warm when caught out in cold weather without heavy clothing is to wrap up in newspaper. Between shirt and jacket or coat, nothing of similar weight fends off cold like paper. And it doesn't tickle like wool—unless you use the comic section.

Start at the Top

It took a student of human nature to observe that travelers seldom pause at the bottom of a hill but most always do at the summit. In southern Utah there's a tough climb out of the low, hot desert over mile-high mountains, on Route 91 north of a little place called Beaver Dam.

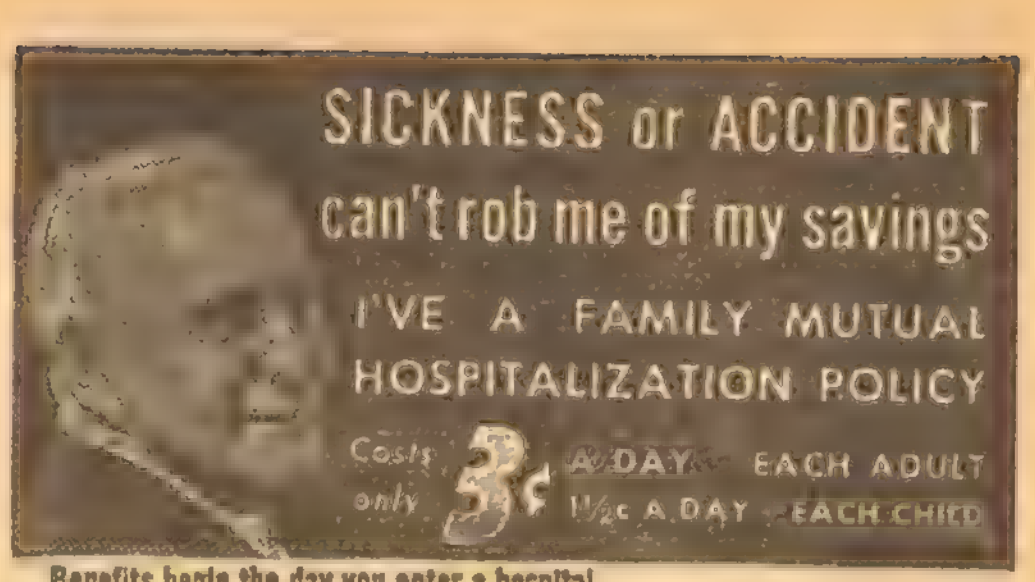
Service stations didn't prosper at the bottom of the grade, though they had big signs warning travelers to stock up with gas, oil and water. You see where some of those hopeful enterprises burned down or gave up and quit. But in a breezy, shaded location up on top an Eastern woman started a wayside establishment and when I was last along that way was busy with a profitable trade.

Elsewhere I've noticed that summit stopping places are generally popular. So any of you hombres or hombresses who are looking for opportunity in such a line, remember it's sometimes better to start at the top than at the bottom.

Apple Trees

Apple trees are slow growers. Many years ago, an Oregon pioneer who knew a little bit

[*Turn page*]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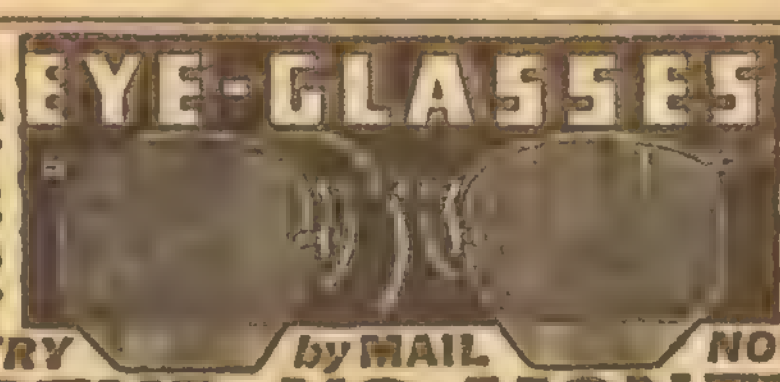

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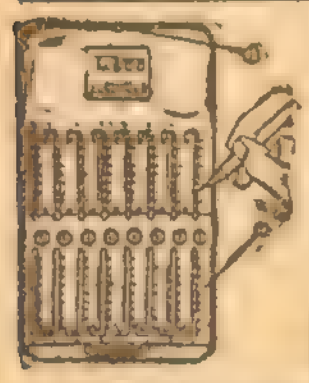

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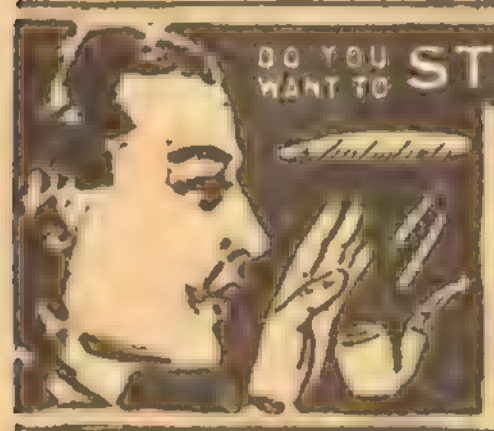

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DEALERS WRITE we will send TO-DAY. Wear

about botany figured out that apple shoots could be grafted successfully onto a species of thorny shrub that grew wild in his mountains. He went around splicing apple twigs of many varieties onto the wild thorn shrub. They thrived. He had apples in no time.

Nowadays you come onto apple trees in the most unexpected places and generations of settlers who have come since have more apples than they know what to do with; old-fashioned Bellefleurs, Roman Beauties, Winesaps, Jonathans, Delicious, Ben Davis, green, yellow and red apples large and small. Also, when deer season comes along, a good place to still hunt is where big bucks come to feed on the windfalls.

Some say opportunity knocks but once, others claim it makes regular rounds and a few forehanded folks create their own opportunities, I reckon. They're opportunity-minded. They're the kind that seem to get along anywhere, whether times are good or bad. They're the long-headed breed that does a lot of sitting and thinking.

Thinking without acting, though, is about as unproductive as acting without thinking. A rich, successful man once told me:

"I hire men to do my thinking. All I do is the deciding."

Maybeso, that's about all that opportunity amounts to, is decision, the ability to decide when a "conjunction of circumstances" gives promise to any activity. Long-headed, long-visioned Texans practically founded the beef industry when they started the daring trail drives that brought great herds to a ready market.

America has been called the land of opportunity and opinion seems to be that it's more abundant in the West than anywhere else. History sort of bears out that point of view. Maybe all this will encourage some of you gals and galluses to spot a neglected maverick opportunity, lasso it and put your brand on it. If it does, I'd admire to know about it. If you have any questions, you know all about sending the stamped, self-addressed envelope, so I won't even mention it this time! S'long.

—CAPTAIN STARR.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

HERE'S the story readers have been asking for! It's a breathless mystery novel featuring the hard-riding Jim Hatfield! It's a harrowing murder tale summoning the

Lone Wolf once more to the perils of the Big Bend country! It's an action-packed, powder-blazing, spine-tingling adventure that came from Jackson Cole's typewriter with true Texas Ranger punch and drive. And in the next smashing issue of TEXAS RANGERS, the big story is spelled—

THE VANISHING VAQUEROS

by

JACKSON COLE

It's the kind of an adventure tale that you'll want to read again and again. It starts on the bank of Dead Man's Creek, a blood-red stream that twists out of the tortuous *malpais* of the Big Bend Country. There on the bank, just where Dead Man's Creek joins the treacherous waters of the Rio Grande River, a Chihuahua peon, Pablo Pasqual, a goatherder by profession, is having a siesta beneath a *sicomoro* tree when he spies a gleaming bottle floating downstream. To the neck of the bottle is tied a maguey leaf to attract his attention.

Pablo Pasqual's dark eyes go wide with fear.

"Ees eet a sign from the devil?" he asks himself.

Well might the peon ask such a question. Dead Man's Creek had got its sinister name from exploring Spaniards long centuries past. Its malignant reputation dated from the aborigines, who viewed the stream as the gateway to evil-spirit land. Mexicans claimed that the holy padres in Cabeza de Vaca's expedition had laid a curse on this water course—which seemed like a sewer tapping the dregs of Hades.

Actually, Dead Man's Creek had got its blood-red color from the silt which was washed down from the rusty cliffs. But legend insisted that the mysterious back-water pools were tinctured with the blood of murdered men, and no vaquero in his right senses would venture up its serpentine gorge to explore its headwaters.

When Pablo Pasqual, the Chihuahuan goat-herder, had built his *jacal* hut at the mouth of Dead Man's Creek, pious ones had crossed themselves and branded him as both fool-hardy and loco. And they were right on both accounts, for Pablo's head was addled by too many years of living by himself in the bad-lands. But it was a lazy life, and he liked it.

His real business was scavenging things from the eddying backwater behind the sand bar of the Rio Grande, which partially blocked the channel of Dead Man's Creek. On one occasion a human corpse, grotesquely bloated from long immersion, had floated up on the flats under the very shadow of Pablo's

[*Turn page*]

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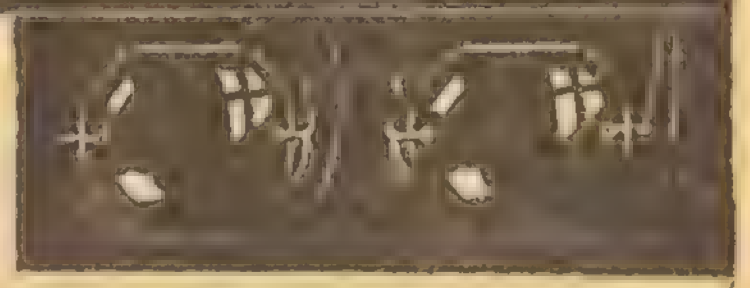

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sicomoro tree. The body yielded the long-bladed *cuchillo* which Pablo wore in a sheath between his shoulders.

And now—here was a mysterious bottle floating toward the sand bar!

The goatherder draws himself erect, watching the waving maquey leaf wired to the neck of the bottle. Slowly he wades out into the shallows. Disappointment twitches his seamy, mahogany face when he finds that the bottle is nothing more than a whiskey flask of amber glass. Yet human hands had tied the maguey leaf to the bottle neck.

Pablo's demented intelligence tells him that perhaps some lonely prospector back up in the *malpais* launched the bottle to satisfy a passing whim. Pablo shakes the bottle. It contains no whiskey. He is in the act of tossing the object far out into the Rio Grande when he realizes that the flask does contain something, after all.

Wading back ashore, Pablo pulls the bottle cork and squints through the bottle neck. He sees a tightly rolled paper cylinder.

And here is the way the story reads—

Pablo Pasqual's warped brain rarely concentrated on one channel of thought for a very long time. But this sealed bottle had an element of drama about it, piquing his interest.

He sat down under the *sicomoro* and shook the tubular paper into his fat hand. Scowling curiously, the vacuous-brained peon found himself holding two pieces of printed paper.

Somewhere back in his forgotten youth, Pablo Pasqual had attended a mission school and had picked up the rudiments of reading. He was thus able to recognize one piece of paper as a fragment torn from a copy of the Coyotero *Weekly Enterprise.* It bore a date only three days old in one corner.

The other paper was an official *documento* of some sort. Even Pablo surmised this much from the gold seal it bore. Two names had been written with blue ink on dotted lines midway down the document.

"Lloyd Rohan," Pablo's lips struggled with the syllables. "Pet-ra Leend-strom."

A shock of surprised pleasure penetrated the goatherder's cobwebby brain. Those names meant something to him.

Petra Lindstrom was the comely flaxen-haired senorita who was the stepdaughter of *El Profesor* Claus Lindstrom, the Norwegian scientist who explored the unknown perils of the Big Bend country in search of fossil remains. Petra Lindstrom had always been kind to Pablo Pasqual. She had bought firewood and goat's milk from him.

Lloyd Rohan was known to the peon only by reputation. A mining engineer, he was. A handsome young gringo who had disappeared without a trace on the very eve of his marriage to Petra Lindstrom.

Pablo Pasqual remembered how the sheriff had dragged the Rio Grande bottom for weeks in search of Rohan's corpse. Petra had put gold coins in Pablo's hand and begged him to search

the cactus jungles of the Big Bend hills for a trace of her vanished fiance. His diligent search had resulted in failure.

Pablo Pasqual's heart quickened its tempo as he groped through the two words written in heavy Old English type across the top of the document—MARRIAGE LICENSE.

Let us jump ahead in this story, beyond the time when Pablo raced to the town of Coyotero to give his find to Petra Lindstrom. And beyond the time when Captain Bill McDowell, the Ranger chief, called Jim Hatfield into Austin headquarters to tell him about Pablo's strange find. And even beyond the time when Pablo boasted through the town of what a famous *hombre* he had turned out to be.

Let us turn to the day when Ranger Jim Hatfield found himself at the mouth of Dead Man's Creek.

The Rio Grande had gouged a deep pool to undercut the bank at this point. The water was too clouded with russet silt from Dead Man's Creek for Hatfield's eyes to penetrate its depth.

Acting on an impelling hunch, the Ranger shucked his boots and stripped off his clothing. Pablo's sheep dogs crowded about his legs as Hatfield poised his superbly muscled body for a moment on the river bank, palms clasped together, toes digging purchase in the grass roots.

Then he dived, cleaving the water expertly, to plummet far beneath the surface.

Water pressure crowded his eardrums as he reached the sludgy river bottom, ten feet down. Clinging to debris as the natural buoyancy of the water tugged at him, Hatfield groped about the river bottom, exploring with his free hand.

At a point directly below the spot where Pablo Pasqual's dogs were whimpering their vigil, Hatfield found what he sought. His hands encountered a yielding object, like a submerged sack of grain.

Clinging to the fabric which enclosed the sunken object, Hatfield traced the outlines of a human arm, moved up to a thick neck and a head with hair that moved with the restless undercurrents.

A rawhide thong encircled the corpse's neck, and Hatfield followed it until he determined that the other end of the thong had been looped several times around a tub-sized boulder.

The horrible fate of Pablo Pasqual, another entirely innocent victim of the dread terror existing in the *malpais*, started six-gun action for Ranger Jim Hatfield. No man to turn down a dare, he guided his fine sorrel bronc, Goldy, toward the forbidden land. And all hades pops loose.

THE VANISHING VAQUEROS in next month's great issue of TEXAS RANGERS has everything that a reader wants in a true action mystery drama. It's packed with excitement and scalp-lifting thrills! Get ready to ride high, wide and handsome with the

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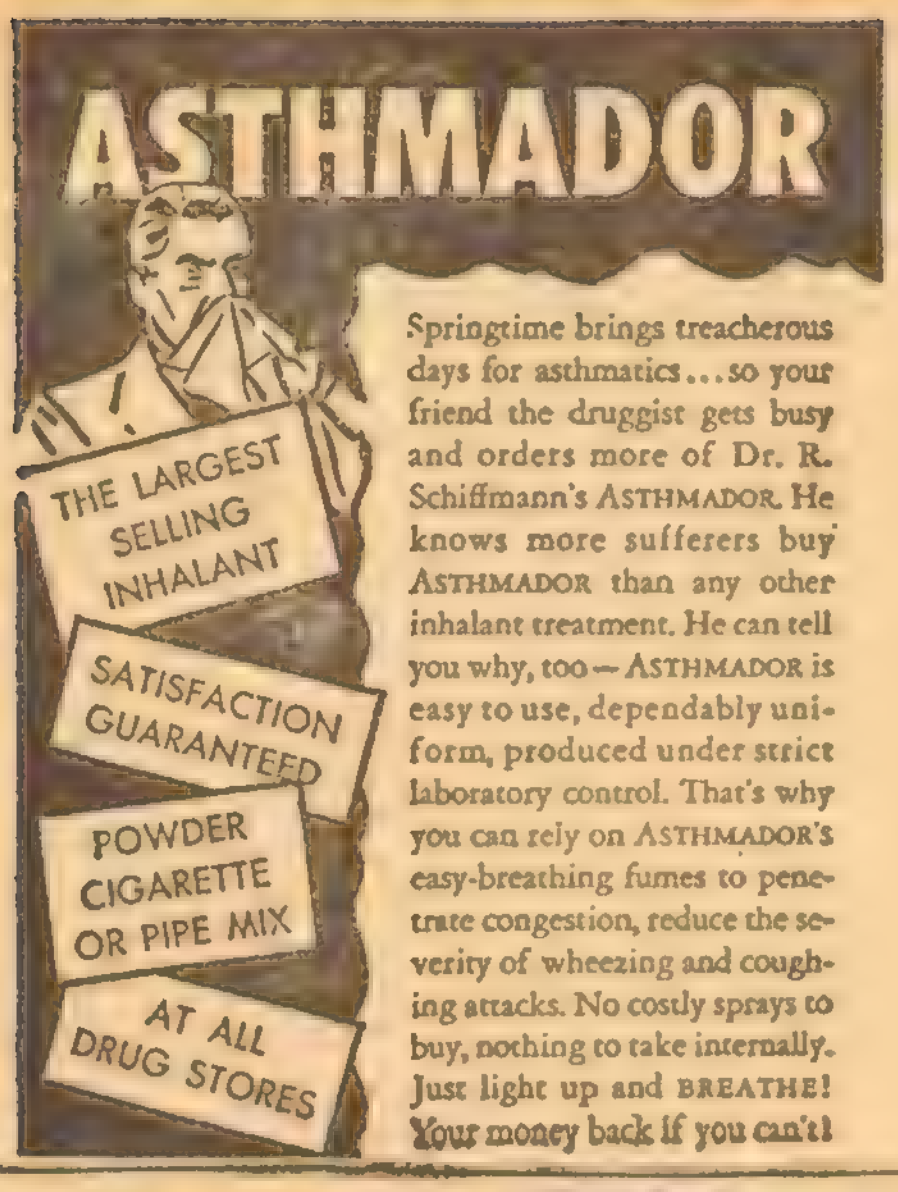

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JUST to show how quickly you readers are on the writing trigger when a lowly editor or a top flight author makes slip of the tongue, and that slip is a bad error in geography, we want to print the following letters:

You didn't make too big a mistake in saying the Colorado River flows into the Gulf of Mexico, because there is a Colorado River in Texas which does just that. It may not be the one you mentioned in your former article, though. Lots of Western stories tell of herds crossing the Colorado River.—*H. B. McMillen, Douglas, Arizona.*

In a recent issue of TEXAS RANGERS I saw where someone had said you made a mistake in saying the Colorado River flows into the Gulf of Mexico, and you came back to change it to the Gulf of California. If you will look at a map, you will see that there is a Colorado River that flows from close to the town of Pride, Texas, in Dawson County, down to San Angelo, to Austin, and to Matagorda on the Matagorda Bay, which is part of the Gulf of Mexico. Don't let them kid you. There are two Colorado Rivers as well as two Red Rivers. Just a fellow who likes to see things right in print.—*Bob Robinson, Lincoln, Neb.*

And there's also a long letter from Mrs. J. A. Sutton, of Hufsmith, Texas, and another from J. W. Black, of Temple, Texas, and there are others—all of them drawing fast as chain lightning and shooting pronto.

We're much obliged, folks!

Speaking of errors in the stories about Jim Hatfield, a reader found in one story where the author said the Lone Wolf had been two years to an engineering school before joining up with the Rangers, and another story which said Jim had had three years of engineering study. Well, Mr. Gordon Rebagliati, I reckon that the editor made another bad slip of the tongue again. It was TWO years of engineering school that Jim Hatfield had before his father was killed by wide-loopers and Jim joined the famous Corps.

We got a very interesting letter to print in this issue, because the hombre who wrote it sent us a penny, betting that much money that we wouldn't print his letter. This writer lives in Granite, Idaho, which he seems to think is pretty peaceful. And he judges the West by his own home town. Here's the letter:

Why don't you print some of the brick bats some time instead of all the bouquets? I happen to live in the West, and I know it isn't the rootin', tootin', shootin' place that you put it out to be. Or are you one of those Eastern dreamers whose ambition is to get out in the great open spaces? We don't have "saloons" out here. They're all "Louie's," "Joe's," and "Smitty's" walk-in-and-stagger-outs—the same as in the East. Although I don't usually read your junk, I'm going to buy your next copy, and I'll bet you the

measly penny in the envelope that this letter won't be in your column.—*B. C. Corley, Granite, Idaho.*

Thanks for the penny, Mr. Corley. It looks as if we win the bet. Sorry you don't like the way we do things in TEXAS RANGERS. We try awful hard to make it a swell magazine, and we publish stories about the old West as well as the new West. And let us tell you something—the old West was certainly a rootin', tootin', shootin' place if there ever was one. And right today, we read stories in the papers about rustling and shootings that would make an old-timer's hair stand on end. Mebbe you don't think so, but it's a fact.

Here's more letters:

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for about six years, and in the back of the book I have been reading some letters being sent into you about Jim Hatfield getting married. I don't think that Jim should get married, because he would be worrying about his wife all the time, and it would interfere with his Ranger work, and she might let the cat out of the bag about Jim being a Ranger when he didn't want it to be known. No, I think Jim should stay single all the way through.

I think it would be a great idea if you should write a story about some man trying to control the whole vast land of Texas, and Jim Hatfield comes to the rescue. I think this man should be some high official in the State Capital, and he should give his orders down through lieutenants, and he should not be suspected till the very last.

Then Jim should get suspicious and go after the man who is doing the people so much trouble. I think Jim should get into more fights in town. I wish you would print this in your magazine so the rest of the people who read TEXAS RANGERS can think this over.—*J. D. Mathis, Knoxville, Tenn.*

I read TEXAS RANGERS regular, being a trader and a salesman. Doc Swap is a favorite of mine, but I would like to see him lose a few times, as I have done, just to hear him bellow. I think it would be more interesting.—*C. A. May, Texarkana, Tex.*

TEXAS RANGERS caught my eye last July. Ever since then I have bought it. Texas is my favorite state even though I live in New Hampshire. I hope to own a large horse ranch in Texas some day. Jim Hatfield sure is swell. I wish he wasn't just a fiction character!—*Edith Record, Lyme, N. H.*

I'm a very good fan of TEXAS RANGERS. I'm an ex-Wave, having been discharged but a short time—twenty-three years old. I'm very much interested in horse breeding, and was raised in the Middle West from Dakota to Mexico. Thanks a lot.—*Fern E. Moule, Seattle, Wash.*

Well, that's all the letters for today, pards. Before we sign off, let us give our address as—The Editor TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. Now don't forget to write. We'll be sitting here just waiting for your post card or letter. So, until we hear from you all, good luck to everybody and *adios.*—THE EDITOR.

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MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING-

(OR IS IT?)

BY GROUCHO MARX

WHAT do you want to save up a lot of money for? You'll never need the stuff.

Why, just think of all the wonderful, wonderful things you can do *without* money. Things like—well, things like—

On second thought, you'd better keep on saving, chum. Otherwise you're licked.

For instance, how are you ever going to build

that Little Dream House, without a trunk full of moolah? You think the carpenters are going to work free? Or the plumbers? Or the architects? Not those lads. They've been around. They're no dopes.

And how are you going to send that kid of yours to college, without the folding stuff?

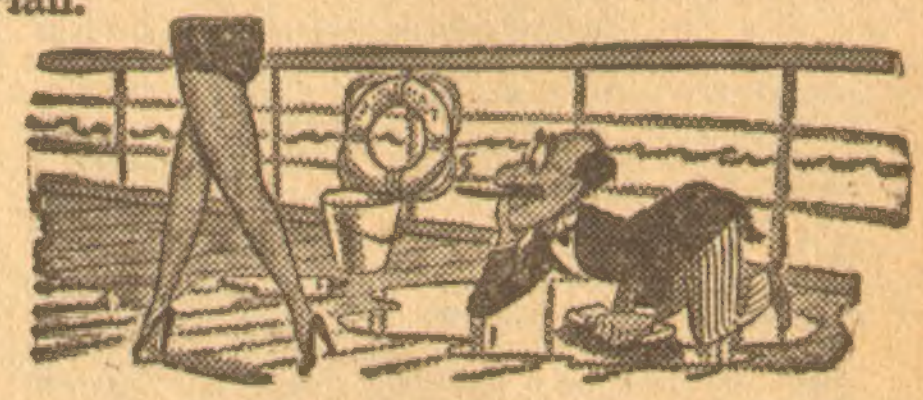
Maybe you think he can work his way through by playing the flute.

If so, you're crazy. (Only three students have ever worked their way through college by playing the flute. And they had to stop eating for four years.)

And how are you going to do that world-traveling you've always wanted to do? Maybe you think you can stoke your way across, or scrub decks. Well, that's no good. I've tried it. It interferes with shipboard romances.

So—all seriousness aside—you'd better keep on saving, pal.

Obviously the best way is by continuing to buy U. S. Savings Bonds—through the Payroll Plan.



They're safe and sound. Old Uncle Sam *personally* guarantees your investment. And he never fobbed off a bum I.O.U. on *anybody*.

You get four bucks back for every three you put in. And that ain't hay, alfalfa, or any other field-grown product.

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So stick with the Payroll Plan, son—and you can't lose.

SAVE THE EASY WAY... BUY YOUR BONDS THROUGH PAYROLL SAVINGS

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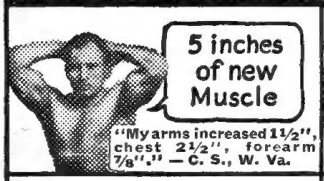
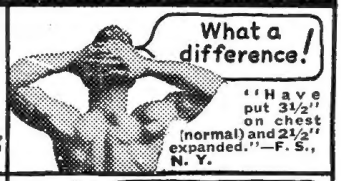
Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*

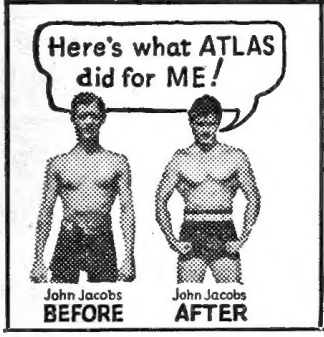
LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE



"My arms increased 1½", chest 2½", forearm ⅞"." — C. S., W. Va.



"Have put 3½" on chest (normal) and 2½" expanded."—F. S., N. Y.



"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress."—W. G., N. J.

"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170." — T. K., N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest — **In competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.**

This photo of Charles Atlas is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new beautiful suit of muscle!

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"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your Strength through *"Dynamic Tension"* you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

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I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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